The Cosmopolitan Sahara: Building a Global Islamic Village in Mauritania

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Abstract

Maatamoulana, a predominantly Bedouin village on the edge of the Mauritanian Sahara, was founded as a center of Islamic education and Sufi practice in 1958 and now attracts an increasingly global stream of visitors and new residents. Maatamoulana's emergence as a global Islamic village hinges on the creative mobilization of the village's position on the periphery of multiple, largely distinct cosmopolitan networks. I describe Maatamoulana as a community of hybrid cosmopolitan subjects who participate, among other things, in a global Sufi movement, the larger Islamic umma, and neoliberal development networks. I present two men who play key roles in the village's globalization. The village's shaykh, Al-Hajj ould Michry, mediates between groups of people who participate in the village in many different capacities. Moulaye ould Khouna directs a non-religious NGO, Terre Vivante, which effectively channels economic resources, disciples, and social contacts into the village. Internationally funded development projects enhance the village's role as an Islamic center while the village's particularities attract development partners. This cosmopolitan Islamic center thus refracts multiple cosmopolitan networks through its own projects. [Cosmopolitanism, Islam, Sufism, neoliberalism, development].

Maatamoulana: a crossroads of many margins

In June of 2003, I took a series of shared taxis from the Islamic Sufi[1] center of Medina Baay in Senegal north to the Mauritanian Saharan village of Maatamoulana.[2] Across the dunes I carried a letter from a senior son of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (1900–1975),[3] Medina Baay's founder, asking Maatamoulana's Shaykh, Al-Hajj "Abd Allah ould Michry, affectionately and universally nicknamed "Hajj,"[4] to oversee my Arabic instruction. Like millions of disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim (known as in Senegal as "Baay Niasse") around the world, Hajj and his village's predominantly Bedouin Arab inhabitants look to Medina Baay as the primary center of spiritual authority (Hill 2006, 2007). During the 1930s and 1940s, Hajj's father and several other younger sons of the leading families of the Tijani Sufi order in Mauritania recognized Niasse as the long-awaited bringer of the "*Fayda*," or "Flood" of divine knowledge. Considered descendants of the Prophet (*Shurafa'*) responsible for spreading Islam and the Tijani Sufi order through West Africa, these "white" Arab (*Bizani*)[5] shocked their communities by submitting themselves not merely to a "black" (*Sudani*) man but one widely rumored to have roots in the lowly blacksmith occupational group (Seesemann 2004). Partly thanks to their recognition, Niasse's influence soon spread through Mau-

ritania (Seesemann 2004, 2011), Nigeria (Hiskett 1994; 1980; Paden 1973; Gray 1998), and from there to a number of other African countries (see Seesemann 2000).

Like many religious centers founded by Shaykh Ibrahim's representatives (*muqaddams*) throughout Africa, Maatamoulana has become a cosmopolitan site attracting Muslims from dozens of countries. On my first day there, I met many Senegalese youths who had come to study the Qur'an, along with youths from Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Gambia, and Guinea, and a middle-aged French carpenter who had converted to Islam over two decades earlier during an unplanned visit to the village. Over the next six months, I met Muslims from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, France, Indonesia, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and Ecuador. A young male Spanish convert visited in 2003 and returned the following year with over two dozen other Muslim Spaniards, including multi-generational families.

At the margins of multiple translocal networks based on distinct discourses and practices of belonging—Islam, the Arab world, a global Sufi movement, a modern capitalist world system, and so on—Maatamoulana is also a point of intersection between these same networks. Indeed, for both aesthetic and economic reasons, its very marginality from global capital and its open desert space are indispensable to its appeal to urban Muslims from Mauritania and abroad. Knowledge seekers appreciate its sparse desert asceticism and deep-rooted pedagogical traditions, and the relatively low cost of living and ease in obtaining visas[6] make it an easier point of convergence than a Western city. The village has joined its geographical and cultural particularities to material resources from international development organizations to transform itself into a cosmopolitan village of Islamic learning.

Globalization processes and transnational networks have profoundly affected Maatamoulana's cosmopolitan orientation today. Yet Islamic centers in the Western Sahara have for centuries been cosmopolitan sites or places where cultural and political others meet as subjects of a universalizing (Islamic) moral order. Long before the emergence of the modern nation-state system and technologies of globalization, the Western Sahara was a crossroads of many linguistic, religious, trade, kin, and political networks extending across and beyond Africa (McDougall 1990; Webb 1995; Robinson 2000; Cleaveland 2002). Thus, many of Maatamoulana's extensive connections are better understood as "translocal" than as "transnational" (Grillo and Riccio 2004; Loimeier 2004; Freitag and Oppen 2009). While these connections may cross contemporary nation-state boundaries, they grow out of networks that precede these boundaries and cross other boundaries (ethno-linguistic, kin, religious) that actors may regard as more significant. Maatamoulana representatives often frame newer relationships with Western NGOs as clearly "transnational," for example, welcoming representatives of a Belgian development organization with a banner reading "Long Live Mauritano-Belgian Friendship."

This incorporation of explicitly transnational language into Maata-moulana's already dense translocal connections is one aspect of the village's globalization, which includes efforts to fashion a global reputation through adopting new communication technologies and participating in global development networks. Since the mid-1990s, Maata-moulana has benefited from a burgeoning of projects sponsored by private European charities and international organizations such as the World Bank. Over the same period, a growing number of Western Muslims joined an already large number of sub-Saharan Africans in frequenting and sometimes relocating to the village. Engaging in these global networks and processes has required Maatamoulana community to learn ways of accommodating multiple distinct cosmopolitan interlocutors and multiple imaginations of community.

Hybrid cosmopolitan subjects

This iridescent village appears initially as a "traditional" Bedouin village; then as a hub in a global Sufi network under charismatic religious governance; a site of ecumenical Islamic community transcending regional and denominational distinctions; and a model of human development. I describe these last three as examples of cosmopolitan orientations because all are inseparable from imaginations, discourses, and institutions of universal moral community. Does this Sufi center's adoption of humanistic language and institutional forms of neoliberal development regimes prove the "secularization thesis" that religion is inexorably giving way to modernity/globalization/rationalization/secularism/neoliberalism (Berger 1967; Gauchet 1997; Weber 1958)? Or is Maatamoulana a quasi-theocratic village whose rise evidences a worldwide "resurgence of religion" (Kepel 1994; Sahliyeh 1990; Westerlund 1996; Berger 1999)? Unsatisfied with either picture, I describe Maatamoulana as a village of hybrid cosmopolitan subjects who engage in distinct yet mutually supporting networks, discourses, imaginations, and institutions of universal (alongside particular) moral community.

Cosmopolitan aspirations have often proved problematic, creating hierarchies and exclusions through universalizing a particular group's values

Cosmopolitan aspirations have often proved problematic, creating hierarchies and exclusions through universalizing a particular group's values (Briggs 2005), particularly Enlightenment projects to universalize elite Western conceptions of abstract humanity (e.g. Kant 1996). Any attempt to transcend or provincialize culture through universalizing one group's cultural conceptions is itself an act of cultural politics (Chakrabarty 2000) suspect of serving imperial "global designs" (Mignolo 2000). Accordingly, recent discussions of "vernacular cosmopolitanisms" (Bhabha 1996; Diouf 2000; Werbner 2006a; Werbner 2006b; Pollock 2000) have provincialized hegemonic cosmopolitan imaginaries, showing how distinct cultural and economic conditions have led to distinct ways of approaching the world as a moral community.

However, while any cosmopolitan imaginary has a vernacular origin, the term "cosmopolitan"—literally, a "citizen of the world" or a "citizen

of the cosmos" (Appiah 2007:xiv)—has long implied an imagination of universal moral community transcending the mere "vernacular," a specificity I maintain in this discussion. Such universal imaginaries are inseparable from cosmopolitan subjectivities, in Foucault's (2000a:331) dual sense of subjectivity both as self-knowledge as a certain kind of individual and as being subjected to forms of power and knowledge that make self- knowledge possible. Although Foucault described each society as having a single "regime of truth" (2000b:131), Maatamoulana community members are subjected to multiple, mutually irreducible yet intertwined regimes associated with kin networks, religious traditions, national belonging, scientific disciplines, medical institutions, and global development and neoliberal corporate institutions. This multiplicity gives rise not only to compound and often conflicting identities (Gregg 1998) but, potentially, to the possibility of mediating between distinct epistemic and institutional domains. Just as Bakhtin's "hybrid utterances" (1981:305) refract contrasting languages and points of view through a single intent,[7] hybrid cosmopolitan subjects refract symbolic and material resources of multiple universalizing regimes through concrete projects.

To highlight Maatamoulana residents' hybridity is not to contrast them with "pure" cosmopolitans (if such a thing exists) but, above all, to contrast the hybridity and tensions of lived cosmopolitan practice with the singular universalism implied by cosmopolitanism. To act as a cosmopolitan is not merely to imagine oneself as a citizen of the world but to command repertoires of behaviors and ways of speaking. These include both an attunement to the customs and expectations of particular cultural others and the adoption of discourses and practices that impose themselves as culturally transcendent. Maatamoulana leaders avidly study their guests' customs in order to offer appropriate hospitality and to decide which of Maatamoulana's particularities to play up or down. Furthermore, they establish common ground with various interlocutors through speaking in terms of multiple "social imaginaries" (Taylor 2004), presenting Islam as a transcendent basis of community among Muslims while redefining Islam as cultural heritage when among non-Muslim development workers. Any kind of cosmopolitan practice bridges certain social distinctions while reasserting others. Although all Maatamoulana residents are affected by Maatamoulana's global connections and Hajj's teachings on cultural openness, only a small number of specialists, most of them men, are delegated to learn to participate in global networks of Islam, Sufi discipleship, and/or human development.

One might question whether Maatamoulana's participation in neoliberal development regimes counts as cosmopolitan practice. By "neoliberalism" I refer to the globally hegemonic theory that progress comes from privatization, safeguarding individual property rights, encouraging entrepreneurialism, and limiting the state's roles (Harvey 2007). Since the 1990s, global bodies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have shifted their emphasis from large-scale structural adjustment programs to local "human development"

goals through NGOs (Elyachar 2002). NGOs dependent on these global institutions are central to implementing neoliberal policies. Neoliberalism is to a large degree an anti-cosmopolitanism, or "a set of designs to manage the world" as opposed to cosmopolitanism, "a set of projects toward planetary conviviality" (Mignolo 2000:721). Yet for better or for worse, many communities in the global south have adopted neoliberal development's institutional and discursive forms to interface with organizations, communities, and material resources around the world in search of what they see as a "modern" standard of living (see Ferguson 2006). Terms permeating (but not necessarily unique to) hegemonic neoliberal networks—sustainable development, technological progress, universal human rights, self-reliance, investment in human capital, women's empowerment, and so on—act as a lingua franca for community, religious, and political groups worldwide. As a hegemonic regime, neoliberalism acts as an imperialistic force that reconfigures local religious practices (see e.g. Soares 2005, 2006); yet particular communities and movements simultaneously "make use of global regimes to reach their ends" (Kloos 2000:282). Rather than simply resist nor succumb to neoliberalism, Maatamoulana's residents refract its resources through their own projects.

The two men discussed below are hybrid cosmopolitan subjects who mediate between Maatamoulana and multiple global networks to transform it into a globally connected Islamic village. The first, Maatamoulana's *Shaykh* Al-Hajj ould Michry, ties together a local Bedouin community, several distinct cosmopolitan imaginations of Islamic community, and largely non-Muslim allies linked to development organizations. The second, Moulaye ould Khouna, spends weekdays in Nouakchott directing Terre Vivante, an NGO initiated by Al-Hajj and closely identified with Maatamoulana. This non-confessional NGO harnesses global circulations of personnel, knowledge, and money in part to build a global hub of Sufi Islam largely subject to religious governance. Maatamoulana's hybrid cosmopolitan environment depends equally on cosmopolitan networks and on the village's deep roots in strict Bedouin mores and Islamic learning and authority.

The *Shaykh*: between Bedouin tribes, global sufism, and modernist Islam

Maatamoulana began as a village of a *shaykh*'s disciples and ascetic students fleeing the world's distractions. The centrality of this *shaykh*'s son Al-Hajj ould Michry, better known as Hajj, to the village's identity and operation can hardly be overstated. Every newcomer stops first at Hajj's house, where all new arrivals are honored guests, whether a foreign researcher, a delegation representing another Sufi order, or a six-year-old Senegalese Qur'an student. Hajj often reminded me that the Prophet's saying, "Whoever believes in God and in the last day must receive his guest well,"[8] was good religion but also

happened to be good politics. In 2003 he told me that his religion would require him to offer hospitality even to George W. Bush or Ariel Sharon, widely perceived then among Arabs and Muslims as their greatest enemies.

Hajj is central to daily activities and must approve any activity affecting the village as a whole. Although he appointed a prominent scholar as *imam* to lead regular prayers, he personally leads the feast and funerary prayers. He delivers a lecture after every afternoon prayer on his specialty, *hadith* (reports of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and deeds). Several evenings a week, in the large courtyard adjoining his house, he delivers the closing address after village scholars give public lessons on poetry and Qur'anic interpretation and pronunciation. His living room often becomes a conference room where he plans with village elders and representatives of NGOs. Hajj is the central node joining Maatamoula-na's diverse constituents and projects, and his charismatic leadership lends a strong sense of common purpose to a polymorphous village.

While many Sufi *shaykh*s show a deliberation bordering on aloofness, this wiry, sixty-something *shaykh* is a spring that jumps into action, seizing his interlocutor by the arm and making intense eye contact (if his interlocutor is proud enough to reciprocate). After deliberating with those he trusts, he moves swiftly, standing and whispering instructions to his deputies. Rather than signal superiority by sitting atop an armchair while others sit on the floor, Hajj sits close to the floor, and the many couches surrounding his receiving room are thus perpetually vacant when he is present. When he wants to speak with me privately, he lifts me by the arm and marches me down Maatamoulana's sandy streets, asking for input on his development plans or explaining how some Islamic teaching harmonizes with human rights. Eating and sleeping little while moving much and fasting often, he is unusually lean for a Sufi *shakyh*, his voice gravelly from constant discussion. *Fayda* adherents throughout Mauritania and Senegal know his motto: "Movement is blessing, and repose will come later."[9]

Hajj's status both among disciples and among Muslims internation-ally derives largely from his father's close relationship with *Shaykh* Ibrahim and Hajj's continued relationship with Medina Baay. In 1958 his father Muhammad al-Michry became the first of *Shaykh* Ibrahim Niasse's nomadic Bedouin deputies (*muqaddam*s) to found a village with his disciples on the edge of the Sahara. His father designated his village as a "school village," and other *shaykh*s subsequently founded educational villages nearby. For centuries, nomadic clerical families had received and materially supported itinerant students from throughout West Africa in their desert schools (*mahzara*). Yet Maatamoulana was unusual in bring-ing together numerous teachers and members of many Arab lineages (*qabila*) and ethnic groups in a single village. Like other Mauritanian *shaykh*s in the *Fayda*, Hajj visits his house in Medina Baay with a large contingent of disciples for several yearly religious events. They present substantial monetary offerings (*hadiyyah*) to Medina Baay's central leaders and distribute smaller sums of money to poor Medina Baay

residents. Such performances of discipleship are indispensable to Maatamoulana's status as a Sufi center.

Hajj exemplifies the epistemic hybridity that characterizes his village community. He began his studies in traditional nomadic schools before his father founded the village, memorizing classical texts with his father and other *shaykh*s in nearby Bedouin camps and earning a reputation as a *hadith* expert. He also earned a secondary degree in Mauritania's state schools and entered the University of Dakar in 1974 to study economics in French.[10] After one year, however, in 1975, his father's death in a car accident compelled him to abandon his studies to succeed his father. Hajj is equally at home debating Islamic law with Islamic scholars as discussing world politics and economic reform in French with Europeans.

Hajj frames his efforts to modernize Maatamoulana as a continuation of his father's Islamic educational mission

Hajj frames his efforts to modernize Maatamoulana as a continuation of his father's Islamic educational mission. He has banned smoking, television, music, and other activities that he believes detract from its environment of religious learning. He instructs men who do not work in education or essential services to seek work outside the village, usually in Nouakchott. These men typically leave their wives and children in the village and return to visit on weekends and holidays, riding crowded flatbed trucks atop sacks of rice and onions. In addition to supporting and certifying the village's over forty Qur'anic schools and its more advanced traditional school (*mahzara*), Hajj has worked with the state to expand the village's public schools, which now offer preschool through the final year of secondary school (*terminale*). Rather than detract from Qur'anic education, this commitment to national education attracts students whose families value the combination of religious and non-religious education.

Families throughout Mauritania, mostly urban families from Nouakchott and Nouadhibou unaffiliated with the Tijani Sufi order, send their sons starting around age seven to spend several years memorizing the Qur'an, usually while studying at the elementary school. These families consider Maatamoulana's desert environment and strict discipline to be ideal for inculcating strong moral values in children. Hajj personally initiates any new child into Qur'anic study, giving him the wooden tablet onto which he will copy his daily lessons and then assigning the child a teacher and a host family, to whom the child's family will send a small sum of money each month. Many younger boys begin by studying with women teachers, who are reputed to be less severe than the men, eventually moving to all-boys' schools under male teachers. Especially early morning, late afternoon, and weekends, when the public schools are not in session, Maatamoulana's streets buzz with the sound of children reciting their lessons. Students who have finished their Qur'anic studies can proceed to the more advanced "traditional school" (*mahzara*)[11] to learn canonical Islamic and Arabic texts from several specialist teachers. Hajj strives to maintain the *mahzara*'s ancient techniques and texts while modernizing its organization. In 2003, the *mahzara* was housed in two tents on the west dune, and by 2005 the same dune boasted a cement-block building that provided two classrooms during the

day and dormitories at night. Hajj is considering transforming it into an accredited, diploma-granting institute, although some faculty resist this project.

In addition to Mauritanian students, dozens of boys and young men from other African countries, many of them *Fayda* adherents, study full-time at Qur'anic schools or the *mahzara*. Unlike Mauritanian students, foreign students typically live at Hajj's expense in simple dormitories. All outsider students in Maatamoulana, whether six or sixty years old, are Hajj's wards. They may approach him for help and must request his permission before traveling or leaving their studies. Several West African students told me of canceling plans to visit their families or to terminate their studies after Hajj had instructed them to stay and continue. For example, one student approached Hajj and obtained permission and money to visit a dentist in Nouakchott to treat cavities.

Girls must stay under their family's protection and cannot participate in this itinerant student lifestyle. Still, girls in the village study far more than is typical in Mauritania. While most Mauritanian girls are expected to learn only enough Qur'anic verses to conduct daily prayers, Maatamoulana's girls are expected to memorize most or all of the Qur'an, albeit usually less than the boys. They must study Islam in their own homes or with a female teacher and cannot study at the *mahzara*. Nearly half of Maatamoulana's certified Qur'an teachers are women,[12] yet few are qualified to teach the more advanced Islamic disciplines. This segregation does not apply to state schools, where boys and girls study in the same classes.

In addition to young students from Mauritania and sub-Saharan Africa, Maatamoulana regularly receives several other categories of Muslim visitors. The longest-established of these are Tijanis from West and North Africa, most of them *Fayda* adherents, who typically visit briefly as part of a spiritual tour of villages of *Shaykh* Ibrahim's deputies. The second category comprises European converts to Islam who consider themselves Hajj's followers. A series of French men converted in Maatamoulana in the late 1970s and either settled in Mauritania or visit periodically from France. Then, starting during my stay in 2003, one Spanish convert and then dozens of others have spent their vacations in Maatamoulana studying Islam. The third category (discussed below) comprises young, non-Tjani Muslim men from Europe and North America who come to Mauritania to study in its desert schools.

Unusual for a leader of a local *Fayda* community, Hajj strives to ensure that any Muslim can feel comfortable worshiping in Maatamoulana. In a nod to Muslim unity, he appointed a grandson of Amadou Bamba Mbacké, founder of the Senegalese Murid Sufi order, as *imam* of the small tent mosque where *mahzara* students prayed on the west dune. Several Guinean students identified as "*Ahl al-Sunna*,"[13] a self-designation for Salafi-inspired reformists. Limiting talk of Sufi doctrines to private conversations with disciples, Hajj publicly adheres to a modern, literalist, reformist-friendly interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna (cf. Launay 1992; Eickelman 1992; Horvatich 1994). He discour-

ages the display of amulets, esoteric textual uses, and photographs of saints that might rankle even the strictest reformist. In contrast, many *Fayda* communities in Senegal and Mauritania openly define themselves through Sufi doctrines and prominently display leaders' images.[14] As Hajj expanded Maatamoulana's mosque, he had an outdoor corridor built separating his father's tomb from the mosque. Many reformists condemn the practice of placing tombs in mosques despite its origins in Islam's beginnings (Hirschkind 2001; Beranek and Tupek 2009). This conciliatory response reflects a broader tendency throughout West Africa toward mutual influence between "reformist" and Sufi Islamic movements (Loimeier 2003; Umar 2001; Villalón 2003) despite continuing disagreements over the nature of religious knowledge and authority. Yet pragmatically accommodating reformist reasoning does not index an unambiguous shift toward a reformist position. Rather, it forms part of a strategy of accommodating the broadest range of positions possible, engaging with *Fayda* adherents, other Sufis, and reformist Muslims according to each group's discursive assumptions.

Although Sufi discourses are muted in Maatamoulana's public spaces, the *Fayda* nonetheless involves cosmopolitan imaginations. The initiated immediately recognize Maatamoulana as a site of the *Fayda*'s global community. Each night, the village bathes in *Shaykh* Ibrahim's poetry and the Tijani litanies amplified over the mosque's speakers. Like *Shaykh* Ibrahim, disciples pray with their arms crossed, whereas most West African Muslims pray with their arms to their sides.[15] Like other cosmopolitan imaginaries, the *Fayda* offers discourses of universal inclusion, describing all humans as literally one in God (Hill 2007, 2010). When I joined Hajj and several disciples in 2003 on a ritual visit (*ziyara*) to the Tijani founder's tomb in Fez, Morocco, we met an American who had arrived alone for the same purpose. After he and a member of Hajj's delegation exchanged a few cryptic references to *Shaykh* Ibrahim and divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*), the two men ran to one another for a hearty embrace upon recognizing one another as fellow disciples. The American joined Hajj's delegation for the rest of the trip.

Paradoxically, Maatamoulana's global appeal as an Islamic center stems not only from its cosmopolitan openness but, just as importantly, from cultivating a distinct sense of remoteness, uniqueness, and authenticity. The jolting dunes one must traverse to reach Maatamoulana repel all but the serious and heighten a bucolic sense of spatial and even temporal remoteness. A Muslim *shaykh* and tribal elders govern the village following their understanding of Islamic Law (*shari'a*). Nearly all adults wear distinctive Western Saharan dress: men wear the flowing blue or white robe (*dira'a*) and women wear a colorful, form-concealing body wrap (*malaffa*). Arab residents strongly identify with their *qabila* (maximal lineage or confederation of lineages, often translated "tribe") and maintain strict gender segregation and endogamy. I occupied primarily masculine spaces, and boys young enough to occupy both spaces shuttled my food from the women's quarters. Bedouin moral austerity, an attachment to memorizing and reciting ancient texts, and a sparse desert

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environment create an aura of authenticity and asceticism that many urban, Western Muslims find captivating. In turn, foreign Muslims and development workers drawn by this sense of remoteness connect Maatamoulana with global networks and resources.

This simultaneous attachment to traditions and openness toward outsiders and change accommodates multiple "thick" and "thin" notions of community. The village's overwhelmingly *Bizani* permanent residents uphold strict moral and religious standards and accept Hajj's word as law. Foreign Muslims who come as disciples or students likewise submit themselves to Hajj's religious authority, while non-Muslim visitors approach Hajj as a community leader, not as an absolute authority. Hajj receives Mauritanian women in the sitting room reserved for women yet receives foreign women, including Muslim women, in the men's sitting room. Foreigners are not held to rules such as the ban on smoking, although Hajj sometimes pleads with them to be more discrete if neighbors complain. Hajj's daily lessons in the mosque reinforce strict *Bizani* understandings of Islamic norms such as gender segregation yet also emphasize moderation and tolerance as central religious values. When a large Senegalese delegation representing a *shaykh* in Dakar visited, Hajj's afternoon mosque lecture instructed Mauritanian disciples to preserve their way of practicing Islam while accepting that more "urban" (*mutahaddir*) Senegalese Muslims might practice Islam differently. Many Mauritanian Muslims told me that, aside from a few key leaders, Senegalese Muslims' Islam was "weak" and "ignorant," evidenced especially in their laxity regarding gender mixing and women's covering. Although mutually negative attitudes will likely persist despite Hajj's lessons, interactions between Mauritanian disciples and foreign Muslims tend to be eminently diplomatic.

Just as Hajj teaches Mauritanian disciples to build on common ground with fellow Muslims, he teaches them not to alienate non-Muslims. Whereas my interlocutors in neighboring villages usually began conversations by describing heaven and hell to motivate me to convert, Maatamoulana residents rarely mentioned the topic, and whenever Hajj heard someone (usually a visitor) ask about my beliefs, he quickly changed the subject, quipping that no one knows God's judgments and that there is "no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256). To non-Muslim outsiders, Hajj presents projects of religious importance to Muslim community members in social and cultural terms: preserving cultural traditions, developing young people's economic capacity, empowering women.

One conspicuous tension between cosmopolitan inclusion and exclusion is the stark contrast between men's and women's participation in Maatamoulana's global and cosmopolitan networks. Women in Hajj's house have learned to cook a variety of cuisines to satisfy Maatamoulana's global guests unaccustomed to Mauritania's simple meat and rice dishes, yet these women seldom meet their guests. The few foreign Muslim women I encountered in Maatamoulana accompanied male kin, except one lone convert from Equador. Some women also play a central

role in the *Fayda*'s translocal networks through matrimonial migration, marrying far from home and ensuring long-lasting kin networks through their descendants. Most Mauritanian Arabs are monogamous and endogamous, but many *shaykhs* take multiple wives, first a paternal relative and then daughters of unrelated *shaykhs*. *Shaykh* Ibrahim gave many daughters in marriage to his principal representatives (*muqaddams*) throughout West Africa. Some of these women have become important Sufi leaders and teachers in their adoptive countries (Hutson 1999). In turn, these representatives, including Mauritanian Arabs, gave daughters in marriage to *Shaykh* Ibrahim's sons. One of Hajj's wives, Rabi'a Niasse, is a daughter of Shaykh Ibrahim who has had several children in Maatamoulana. Yet despite women's centrality to sustaining Maatamoulana's translocal networks, their seclusion and limited access to relevant education limit their participation in cosmopolitan encounters.

Over the years, cross-cultural marriage patterns between rank-and-file disciples have become increasingly varied, reflecting both Maatamoulana's increasingly global reach and the continued centrality of Arab lineage and customs. Despite their remarkable openness to foreigners, Maatamoulana's "white Arab" (*Bizani*) families still insist on marrying their daughters within their own or a closely allied *qabila*. Consequently, Hajj's attempts to integrate his French disciples into the local community since the early 1980s have been limited to helping them marry "black Arab" (*Hartani*) women of slave descent who accept marrying foreigners to improve their economic condition and social status. Since my first stay in Maatamoulana in 2003, more diverse marriage patterns emerged, yet still none involving *Bizani*. First, in 2006, a young Spanish man who had first come to Maatamoulana in 2003 married the daughter of a French disciple and a *Hartani* woman. Starting in 2008, three young Hausa men from Niger and Nigeria who had been studying in Maatamoulana since 2001 married Spanish women. One of them, Maalam,[16] a soft-spoken thirty-year-old, told me over Internet chat how each of these three Hausa men had met a Spanish woman visiting the village. Reversing the custom in which a man asks a woman's family for her hand in marriage, each Spanish woman and her relatives had approached Hajj to ask for permission to marry the young man. The Nigerian now lives with his wife in Nigeria, while the two Nigeriens now work in Spain as *shari'a* consultants in *halal* food certification.

These changing matrimonial arrangements reflect the hybridization of Maatamoulana's increasingly global networks with longer-established translocal networks and practices of religious authority. In contrast to earlier French-Mauritanian marriages, which had grafted foreigners into Maatamoulana's local community, more recent Hausa-Spanish marriages united members of Maatamoulana's longstanding translocal African networks with members of its expanding European networks. Whereas previous weddings had allowed *Hartani* women to improve their lot by marrying higher-status European men, marriages to middle-class European women allowed jobless African men to migrate to Europe to find employment using their Islamic education. Under Hajj's leadership,

Maatamoulana has grafted global cosmopolitan networks onto its earlier, largely Tijani and African cosmopolitan networks.

Developing sufism sustainably: the NGO "Terre Vivante"

When interacting with different cosmopolitan audiences, those delegated to mediate between this religious community and global development regimes must shift between particular universalisms while downplaying certain aspects of the village's religious identity. The most notable actor in engaging with the development world is Moulaye ould Khouna, one of Hajj's Sufi *muqaddam*s (representatives) and acting director of the NGO Terre Vivante in Nouakchott. In his early forties, Moulaye is a *Bizani* but was raised in Senegal and participated in Qadiri and Murid Sufi groups before becoming a fervent disciple of Hajj and by extension *Shaykh* Ibrahim. Like Hajj, Moulaye studied under contrasting educational regimes, memorizing many classical texts in traditional Islamic schools, learning Sufi mysticism with spiritual guides, and studying law at the University of Dakar. He has taken Hajj's motto of perpetual motion to heart: he sleeps little, personally takes charge of important details in his workplace, and spends his waking hours running from embassy to donor organization to the airport to pick up guests. Like many men, he lives in Nouakchott during the week and rides alongside thirty other men atop a flatbed truck to visit his wife and children in the village each weekend.

Moulaye and other Maatamoulana residents have built this global religious center on a stage set by a number of disastrous global economic changes. The collapse of Mauritanian agriculture and pastoralism since the 1970s and the resulting flight to cities have not been matched by growth in private sector employment. Moreover, beginning in 1984, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) financed and overseen by the IMF, the World Bank, USAID, and European nations have dried up public employment and social programs while creating few alternatives. Whereas the early SAPs favored building industry and infrastructure, by 1991 the World Bank and other organizations had shifted their emphasis to the "human development index," focusing on rural development through private NGOs (Seddon 1996). A diversity of NGOs sprung up in Nouakchott and worldwide, including some affiliated with Islamic leaders (Benthall 2002; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003; Kaag 2007; Leichtman 2009). Work in development and international organizations provides one of the few stable and prestigious occupation choices for educated men from Maatamoulana.

In 1993, Hajj ould Michry called several Mauritanian and French disciples to discuss the possibility of founding an NGO in Nouakchott. They founded Terre Vivante as a non-denominational organization serving Mauritania's general population. Its officers work hard to establish an international reputation of transparency and honesty, and it

consistently receives important grants and contracts from national World Bank-sponsored programs, USAID, Oxfam, Unicef, and various European private charitable organizations. Nearly all upper-level administrative staff and Maatamoulana field staff are close disciples of Hajj from Maatamoulana, while the Nouakchott support staff is largely non-Arab and non-disciple (e.g. a Congolese receptionist, Mauritanian Haal-Pulaar program manager, a Senegalese Haal-Pulaar guard). Terre Vivante's funding proposals and reports closely resemble those of countless development NGOs around the world. The issue that Moulaye has perhaps spent the most time developing competence in and writing proposals for is HIV-AIDS prevention, a high priority matter for the World Bank, although it affects a relatively small number of Mauritanians.[17] Terre Vivante officers are conversant in current trends in micro-credit, public health, community sanitation, rural women's empowerment, and community ownership. As required by the "gender and development" paradigm currently advocated by the major international institutions,[18] all their projects involve local women as active participants and beneficiaries, often through organizing "women's cooperatives." Whereas women-centered projects in many Muslim contexts have met opposition for allegedly imposing Western ideals (De Cordier 2010), Terre Vivante workers' association with religious authority and local norms has largely protected them from such problems. However, they do not challenge gender segregation and gendered division of labor.

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Terre Vivante's 2003 Activity Report[19] lists twelve projects, most of them in low-income urban neighborhoods of Nouakchott and Rosso. All the projects receiving funding from the major international organizations (Unicef, Oxfam, World Bank- and UN-sponsored programs) target populations with no clear religious connection to Maatamoulana or Hajj, supporting Terre Vivante's self-presentation as a non-religious, general-interest NGO. However, of the twelve projects listed, four target Maatamoulana and one target Bouguemoune, a *Hartani* village south of Maatamoulana with close ties to Hajj. All the Maatamoulana and Bouguemoune projects are sponsored not by the major international organizations but by private charities who have developed a particular interest in Maatamoulana through its networks of European disciples. Terre Vivante occasionally partners with the United States Embassy to distribute aid. In 2003, after flooding in the Senegal River Valley displaced thousands of families, the United States Embassy and the Mauritanian government contracted Terre Vivante to distribute tents and other supplies to flood victims. The Maatamoulana Women's Cooperative sewed hundreds of tents, which Terre Vivante officers then transported to the affected villages, presenting them during a public ceremony attended by the United States ambassador. The United States Embassy, looking to cultivate relationships with moderate Islamic leaders, also worked through Terre Vivante to open a satellite-connected computer lab in Maatamoulana in 2004.

Terre Vivante's centrality to Maatamoulana extends far beyond activities listed in the official annual report, which only lists projects

currently funded by external partners. The report does not list numerous development projects that the NGO initiated in the past and continues to oversee without outside partners. These include the largely self-sustaining Maatamoulana Women's Cooperative and its many projects (e.g. a milk production center, an arts and crafts center) and the Maatamoulana cooperative gardens, for which Terre Vivante previously secured funds from a small private charity to build a gasoline-powered pump and enclosure. The NGO initiated and periodically revamps Maatamoulana's major infrastructure projects. These include the pump that delivers clean tap water to homes throughout the village, the gasoline-powered generator providing electricity for several hours a day, and the village's garbage collection and other sanitation programs. Hajj, Moulaye, and prominent villagers maintain a constant discussion about potential economic and educational projects. Terre Vivante headquarters and staff act as the village's *de facto* urban office, recruiting station, and guest reception committee, especially with regards to Western guests. Moulaye always had me stay with his family when in Nouakchott and gave me access to Terre Vivante's facilities. When I stayed with Moulaye, we talked at length about Sufism, Islam, and development, and he wove long passages of *Shaykh* Ibrahim's Sufi poetry together with the principles of sustainable development. Terre Vivante officers similarly looked after other foreign guests even if they had little to do with the NGO's projects. Although this policy sometimes leads to recruiting partners, it reflects a more general cosmopolitan impulse to include as many people as possible on whatever common ground possible regardless of whether any given relationship will instrumentally benefit the community.

Among these foreign guests were a growing number of young North American and European converts who find Mauritania's desert schools to be an affordable place to study away from the distractions of urban life. These itinerant students are distinct from more casual "spiritual tourism" (Geary 2008) in that they travel to Mauritania not for a short visit but often for a year or more or for a series of vacations. Benefiting from traditions of community-supported education instead of engaging in fee-for-service education, they do not contribute to an economy of spiritual tourism in any conventional sense (e.g. Haq and Jackson 2006). Many of them do not start with a destination in mind but visit several Saharan schools before settling on one. On periodic trips to Nouakchott, these young men decompress from desert life, exchange stories and advice, and take care of communications and visa issues. Moulaye actively reaches out to these youth and offers Terre Vivante's help if they encounter visa or other problems. After one visit to Nouakchott, he asked me to accompany a group of three youths, an Austrian, an American, and a Briton of Pakistani origin, back to the village, where they stayed with me in my guest house. After several days as guests of Hajj, the American and Briton continued their search for a teacher, while the seventeen-year-old Austrian convert stayed to study the Qur'an for at least a year. Terre Vivante similarly introduced several of Hajj's European disciples to Maatamou-

Among the guests were young North American and European converts who find Mauritania's desert schools to be an affordable place to study away from the distractions of urban life

lana, including a French nurse who converted and entered the Tijani Sufi order after volunteering in the village.

As a secular NGO that doubles as the de facto urban front-door to an Islamic village, Terre Vivante is central to Maatamoulana's intersection between religious and non-religious forms of cosmopolitanism. Yet the tension between these roles is at times palpable. In 2003, several men living in Nouakchott with families in Maatamoulana convened a meeting at Terre Vivante's headquarters to plan a website for Maatamoulana. The first item was to decide which aspects of the village the website should emphasize. Several attendees immediately mentioned the village's dedication to Islam and traditional Islamic educational methods. A Terre Vivante official countered that he had always considered Maatamoulana primarily as a community oriented toward development. A heated discussion ensued, and this apparently simple difference of opinion proved an impasse that led the committee to dissolve without producing a website.

This small controversy illustrates the disjunctures that these hybrid cosmopolitan subjects encounter as they navigate between several distinct cosmopolitan networks. When interacting with outsiders, Maatamoulana community members can choose which set of principles and institutional relationships to highlight as a basis of shared moral community. The Internet, however, is available to many audiences and forces one to identify oneself and one's privileged public unequivocally. This disagreement concerned not who was more religious but rather which cosmopolitan public to privilege in presenting Maatamoulana to a global public. Which color should a single snapshot of this iridescent village record? While to some, the village's primarily cosmopolitan Islamic identity was obvious, NGO officials, although personally no less religious, preferred to privilege another cosmopolitan public: liberals interested in development as a universal human value. These well-traveled development specialists are acutely aware that images of Maatamoulana's Qur'anic schools might unintentionally evoke militant Taliban "*madrasas*" depicted in the Western news media, while Hajj's apparently theocratic authority might recall Islamists' struggle to impose *shari'a*. The NGO's website (http://www.terrevivante.net) evocatively describes Maatamoulana as "high place of Sufi spirituality" rather than describing it as an Islamic center dedicated largely to memorizing the Qur'an and Islamic legal texts. Development partners might tolerate and even celebrate "spirituality" as local color yet might be ruffled by Islamic zeal, strict Bedouin mores, and women's seclusion and covering.

International organizations' neoliberal paradigm and emphasis on human development, although imposed unilaterally on the global south, have created opportunities for Maatamoulana residents to participate in global networks and to imagine themselves as cosmopolitan subjects. As a hybrid cosmopolitan, Moulaye subjects himself to global development regimes yet nonetheless frames his participation in such regimes as part of a religious calling to build Maatamoulana as a center of Islamic cosmopolitanism. Such hybrid cosmopolitans must shift their language and

discursive premises as they shift between cosmopolitan audiences. In secular circles, they must transfigure Maatamoulana's Islamic identity into distinctive cultural heritage, while in religious circles, they must present alliances with non-Muslim organizations as serving a religious mission to foster Islamic study.

Conclusion

This portrait of two protagonists of Maatamoulana's transformation into a global Islamic village has shown how Maatamoulana engages in multiple, intersecting cosmopolitan imaginaries. The village's broad appeal as a cosmopolitan village hinges partly on core community members' mastery of several distinct universalizing discourses such as Islam, Sufi mystical realities, and human progress presenting themselves as transcending cultural particularities. Yet Maatamoulana's appeal hinges just as importantly on the village's particularities—its (manageable) remoteness, its sparse desert landscape, its venerable and ancient learning traditions, and its strong Bedouin cultural identity and mores, including practices that may seem decidedly un-cosmopolitan. This tension is especially apparent in the maintenance of *qabila* boundaries through endogamy, strict gender segregation, and traditional gender roles even as Terre Vivante's male leaders concentrate much of their energy on women-centered projects. To be a hybrid cosmopolitan is to a large extent to manage such potential contradictions and, more importantly, to turn them to one's advantage.

The two actors discussed here are examples of hybrid cosmopolitan subjects who navigate carefully between cosmopolitan regimes that are complementary yet at times ill-at-ease with one another. Hajj owes his clout as an Islamic leader largely to his position in a global Sufi movement, the *Fayda*, which from its beginning has defined itself as a cosmopolitan movement uniting diverse people through mystical knowledge. Yet within the broader world of Islam, such Sufi allegiances can appear at best as particular identities and at worse as heterodox traditions. Hajj accordingly restricts open discussion of Sufism and instead promotes Islamic discourse acceptable to a broad spectrum of Muslims. Moulaye's role mediating between this Islamic community and global institutions pushes him to adopt multiple cosmopolitan languages. When working with outsiders on non-religious discursive grounds, he highlights shared humanistic values such as improving quality of life. He downplays the village's Islamic identity in favor of its Sufi identity, which many Westerners perceive as a depoliticized and nonthreatening part of local culture. In each case, cosmopolitan subjectivities are inseparable from the discursive and institutional regimes that divide what counts as universal moral community from cultural particularisms.

Although Maatamoulana's community members, as hybrid cosmopolitan subjects, shift between and bring into conversation multiple universalizing imaginaries and regimes, they refuse to be reduced to any one of them. Residents who, like Moulaye, learn to speak the language of

When working with outsiders on non-religious discursive grounds, Moulaye highlights shared humanistic values

and participate in neoliberal institutions are not simply neoliberal subjects. By subjecting themselves to multiple regimes and resisting any singular subjectivity or notion of community, Maatamoulana's community members benefit from symbolic and material resources from multiple complementary cosmopolitan networks. Maatamoulana is a hybrid cosmopolitan site that could only materialize at the intersection of many marginalities at the Sahara's edge.

Notes

[1]Sufism is the mystical tendency in Islam that emphasizes spiritual truths beyond the literal texts and typically involves submission to a *shaykh*, or spiritual guide.

[2]This is the spelling that he uses in official correspondence. The Mauritanian Arabic *Ma'tamulana* derives from Standard Arabic *Ma'ta Mawlana* (Gift of God).

[3]This is the Arabic spelling of his first name and the Wolof spelling of his last name. His Senegalese followers generally call him "*Baay*" (Father).

[4]The "Al-Hajj" in his name preceded his ever having completed the pilgrimage, from his grandfather after whom he is named. Thus Hajj here is a nickname, not a title.

[5]The ethnonym "*Bizani*" derives from the Arabic word for "whites" (*bid*) and refers to white Arabs and their dialect (which in Standard Arabic is called "*Hassaniyya*").

[6]Although Mauritania temporarily stopped issuing visas to United States citizens in 2010, in general foreigners can obtain a visa on the same day.

[7]Bakhtin's notion of hybridity has informed many linguistic anthropologists' approaches (Spitulnik 1998; Woolard 1998; Swigart 2000).

[8]"*Man yu'min bi-Llahi wa-bi-al-yawm al-'akhir fa-l-yukrim dayfahu*" (Sahih Bukhari).

[9]"*Al-haraka al-baraka, wa-al-sukun sa-yakun.*"

[10]The University of Dakar (now L'Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar) was Mauritanians' primary university before the University of Nouakchott opened in 1981 and remains better established in many fields.

[11]*Mahzara* (from classical Arabic "*mahdar*," a gathering place) can designate any traditional Qur'anic or other Islamic school. In Maatamoulana it designates the post-Qur'anic school.

[12]Paul Marty (1917:II:50–51) mentions Mauritanian Arab women substituting for absent husbands but not running their own Qur'anic schools as women do in Maatamoulana.

[13]This term translates into French as "Sunnite" and self-designates several Salafi-inspired movements (Augis 2009; Gomez-Perez, LeBlanc, and Savadogo 2009). In contrast, the designation "Sunni Islam" includes nearly all West African Muslims.

[14]Sufi adherence is perhaps uniquely salient in Senegal, where Sufi orders have been central to the public sphere and politics since colonial times (Villalón 1995).

[15]Throughout West Africa, followers of *Shaykh* Ibrahim are recognizable through praying with their arms crossed, whereas most other Maliki Muslims extend their arms downward. Salafi-oriented reformers independently brought back the same practice from the Middle East (Launay 1992). Thus, crossing the arms marks both *Fayda* adherents and their most vocal reformist opponents (Kane 2003).

[16]Names of private disciples are pseudonyms.

[17]In 2007 the CIA Factbook (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2156rank.html) ranked Mauritania 89 of 165, lower than most Western European countries, in HIV/AIDS rates.

[18]The "gender and development" paradigm, dominant in development organizations since the 1990s, succeeded the "women in development" and "women and development" paradigms. Conceptually, "gender and development" shifts the focus from empowering women and valorizing their roles to addressing the roots of gender distinctions and inequality (Rathgeber 1990; Razavi and Miller 1995; Klenk 2004). It is unclear to what extent such conceptual debates influence Terre Vivante's projects, which fulfill sponsors' requirement of involving and benefiting women without specifically addressing gender.

[19]http://www.terrevivante.net/nav/rapport2003activite.html.

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