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To cite this article: Marie Brossier (2016): Senegal's Arabic literates: from transnational education to national linguistic and political activism, Mediterranean Politics, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2016.1230944

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2016.1230944>



Published online: 02 Nov 2016.



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## Senegal's Arabic literates: from transnational education to national linguistic and political activism

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### ABSTRACT

This article studies the role of the Arabophone community in postcolonial social and political transformations. More specifically, it focuses on the case of the *Arabisants* in Senegal. Forged through the mobility between the two shores of the Sahara, they are willing to emerge as a more visible political force since the 2000s. This article sheds light on *Arabisants'* endeavours to participate in various forms of political advocacy. It demonstrates that they intend to stand as the political entrepreneurs of the Muslim community, to challenge the hegemony of Sufi Brotherhoods, and consequently, to challenge the state's alliance with the Sufi orders. In so doing, *Arabisants* emerge as counter-elite in the public and political debate in Senegal.

### Introduction

Arabic, the language in which Islam was revealed, holds a special status in Senegal, a country in which 95 per cent of the population is Muslim. Senegal's Arabophone community claims to have held an elite status since the eleventh century, centuries before the formation of the Francophone elite, which owes its position to the comparatively recent colonial period. Currently, Arabophones constitute a heterogeneous group in Senegal because they have not been socialized into a single educational system. Many were educated in Senegal, including in Koranic schools (classic or modern *daaras*), Arabo-Islamic private schools (founded by local dignitaries), and more recently, Franco-Arab public schools; many others had left Senegal to study in North African and Middle Eastern universities and have since returned to Senegal to work. The latter form a group that defines itself as *Arabisants* (Arabic literates). This group encompasses fluent Arabic-speakers, a language they have learned and practiced in Arab countries. This is in contrast with those who learned it through studying the Koran in Senegal. Back in Senegal, *Arabisants* frequently speak and write fluently in Arabic and promote the use of this language in a society which is

mostly illiterate in Arabic, aside from those who have learnt Koranic verses in scripture schools. In a way, the *Arabisants* are part of a historical transnational flow of intellectual figures that has connected Africa to the Arab world. This movement has relied on commercial and trans-cultural exchanges that historically have made the Sahel region a key area for the flow of goods and ideas (Krätli & Lydon, 2011; Kane, 2012). The constitution of networks between the Islamic centres of Muslim African countries, the Maghreb, the Middle East and the Far East (Otayek, 1993; Gomez-Perez, 2005b; Bava, 2014) have led to the creation of a 'community of knowledge' (Brenner, 2001). These *Arabisants* thus constitute a rising intellectual elite with the potential to conquer new territories, all made possible by the transnationalization of Islam on the continent (Otayek, 1993, 2014). But despite their historical significance, and the growing role they are playing in contemporary Senegal, scholars have not paid enough attention to the Arabophone community (Fall, 1993; Drame, 2003; Dia, 2015). The study of the state and religion has focused on the three poles of the Senegalese 'success story': Sufi clerics, citizens and the government (Cruise O'Brien, 1992). Yet, this literature has underestimated the importance of other significant actors in the Muslim sphere, including the role of the Arabophone literates in postcolonial social and political transformations.

In order to fill the gaps in the literature and to build on the relatively modest research devoted to Arabophones in Senegal and West Africa, this paper examines the case of the latter and more particularly that of the *Arabisants* in Senegal. This term designates the members of the Arabophone community who have taken upon themselves to engage in public and political activism. Characterized as *Arabic literates*, *Muslim intellectuals* (Otayek and Soares, 2009) or 'non-Europhone' intellectuals, the *Arabisants* 'come from a scholarly tradition and formulate claims couched in Islamic political terms' (Kane, 2012: 3). In particular, forged through the mobility between the two shores of the Sahara, the *Arabisants* have been willing to emerge as a more visible political force since they began religious activism. Though they are easily characterized as 'reformists', they do not necessarily oppose the traditionalist structures of Sufi Islam (Otayek, 1993: 8).

They were long considered suspicious due to their ability to challenge the politics of state control (especially under the S. Senghor Presidency from 1960 to 1980) and their call for a return to a strengthened orthodoxy in the ritual practices of Islam in conformity with their understanding of the precepts of the Koran and the Sunna (Brossier, 2010). In some cases, this was concomitant with an opposition to the practices of Islam as taught by predominant Sufi brotherhoods. Since the 2000s, the *Arabisants* have endeavoured to participate in various forms of political advocacy. They have demonstrated that they can rally with Sufi activist groups on some specific issues such as the reform or the Family Law (2002–04). Moreover they have developed an autonomous form of political mobilization as was seen with the election of a MRDS party

(*Mouvement pour la réforme et le développement social*) candidate to parliament in 2012, Imam Mbaye Niang. As it will be shown, the *Arabisants* intend to stand as new political entrepreneurs of the Arabophone Muslim community, to challenge the hegemony of Sufi Brotherhoods, and consequently, to question the state's alliances with Sufi orders.

Muslims adopting an 'Arabized versioning of Islam legitimize their religious practices through knowledge of the Arabic language and the capacity to read the Qur'an in its original form. Claims to knowledge are equivalent to claims of orthodoxy or claims of privileged access to religious orthodoxy' (Leblanc, 1999). The link between knowledge and religiosity is not a new phenomenon in West African Islam (Brenner & Last, 1985). For the *Arabisants*, Arabisation, which is seen as a path leading to religious and ritualized knowledge based on Arabic literacy, constitutes the brink of a proper practice of Islam. In this perspective, the democratization of Arabic literacy is meant to overcome the monopoly of Arabic by a few clerics and scholars, and to spread the language in a way that West African Muslims will use it in their daily activities. Democratization of Arabic literacy is accordingly closely related to the spread of Arabic as the language of schooling.

Since the 1970s, the *Arabisants* in Senegal have raised educational issues, demanding that the Senegalese Muslim population have access to public education taught in both French and Arabic. President Abdoulaye Wade (2000–12) cautiously conceded in the early 2000s to their demand for liberalizing the education system to be reformed to include a religious curriculum. This policy change augmented the public supply of Arab-Islamic education. As a consequence, Arabophones have become important actors, building on symbolic and material resources such as their linguistic skills, religious knowledge and transnational networks. Their new position also gives them access to funding opportunities, which helps them adopt the position of the new counter-elite and address the interests of the majority of Muslims in Senegal. Their aspiration to convert their religious and social prestige to political capital is nonetheless challenged by their inability to significantly mobilize the Muslim community. On one hand, this can be explained by the perception, in Senegalese society, that their mastery of Arabic and their Arabo-Islamic education is not a tool for political representation, but rather a sign of social and religious prestige. On the other hand, it can also be explained by their failure to constitute a solid political bloc, mostly because their approaches to Islam and politics are too diverse. During the 2012 presidential elections, they were able to rally around a single social issue, education, but they failed to unite as one political force. Therefore, it is still difficult for them to act as key players in the decision-making process and this is why their political activism has not gone beyond the educational advocacy level.

Building on the existing literature on these understudied actors and on extensive empirical data collected during my fieldwork research in Senegal between 2012 and 2015, this paper aims to shed light on this specific form of Muslim

activism in Senegal. I intend to offer a perspective on actors who might be ideal recruits for different branches of radical Islam. As Sahelian politics is increasingly attracting the attention of international observers and is often seen as a laboratory for extremists and terrorists, it is important not to overlook the singularities of the actors and groups at play in this region.

## The politics of Arabophones in West Africa: a comparative perspective

As the literature on Muslim activism in Senegal and in West Africa has thoroughly emphasized the importance of Sufi orders in the course of state formation since the colonial period, the study of Arabophone intellectuals has been understudied. Pioneering studies were conducted in the 1960s and 1970s at a time when youths of major Sufi families travelled to Arab universities to obtain degrees and subsequently returned to Senegal (Hunwick, 1964; Goody, 1971). However, the complexity of the groups and ideologies which have emerged and developed in the post-colonial period has not brought about a long-term interest from the Africanist Islamology, unlike that of Sufi Brotherhoods or jihadi movements of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Robinson & Triaud, 2012). Originating from Sufi Brotherhoods, *Arabisants* have confronted their former religious and spiritual guides and become a new generation of Muslim intellectuals since the 1950s. They can be defined by a process of Arabization. By legitimizing their religious knowledge through a mastery of the Arabic language, they effectively expand Arabization itself (Leblanc, 1999: 485). Brenner and Last (1985) defines Arabization as the centrality of the Arabic language, reformed Qur'anic teaching methods, and alliance with Islamic causes against the Western world. Scholars have construed that the Islamization and Arabization of West African societies are both political processes. This demonstrates the ambiguity of Islam as a set of beliefs and practices, but also as the identity of an elite or an identity of resistance through orthodoxy (Otayek, 1993; Gomez-Perez, 2005a; Soares and Otayek, 2007) as seen in Mali (Brenner, 1993; Soares, 2005), Burkina-Faso (Brenner, 1993; Otayek, 1993; Bredeloup, 2014), Niger (Sounaye, 2016), Côte d'Ivoire (Leblanc, 1999; Miran, 2006), Bénin (Abdoulaye, 2003) and Sierra Leone (Bledsoe and Robey, 1986) and Nigeria (Umar, 2001).

### Who are the Senegalese *Arabisants*?

In order to better understand who the *Arabisants* are, it is important to differentiate the main groups of Arabic speakers in Senegal: those who learned the language in the Senegalese Arabo-Islamic system and those who mastered the language abroad, in North African or Middle Eastern universities. The latter truly master the language, or so they claim, thanks to their long-time immersion in an Arabic-speaking community, in contrast with the other Arabophones, who

learned it in Senegal. The *Arabisants* asserts an Arabized version of Islam based on the formal acquisition of Arabic, allowing for the reading and understanding of the Qur'an in Arabic (Leblanc, 1999: 485). A Senegalese scholar who was first trained in the Senegalese Arabo-Islamic system and then in the Egyptian and French systems explains: *Those who studied in daara are not good Arabic-speakers they speak badly, their listening itself is poor. We Arabisants are not treated like real Arabisants. We are lost. We have hybrid profiles.* (Interview with M.S, Dakar, April 2014).

In a country where people mostly speak their mother tongue and use predominantly Wolof and French in the informal public sectors, it is unusual to find people who are fluent in Arabic. The 2002 population census revealed that Arabic is spoken by 40 897 people (that is, 0.4 per cent of the overall population (9 858 482) of which 0.1 per cent consider it as their first language, source: General Population and Housing Census (RGPH) 1988 and 2002). In a country where roughly 95 per cent of the population is Muslim, such small numbers could seem surprisingly low. However, it is important to stress that French colonial education policies significantly impacted the linguistic landscape (Ware, 2009). Indeed, faced with the impossibility of controlling the Koranic schools, the French colonial administration changed its education policy from coercive control to *laissez-faire* and used Arabic to draw parents and students to colonial *Medersas* but also to French public schools (Bryant, 2015).

At the time of Senegal's Independence in 1960, the Francophile and Catholic profile of the newly elected President L.S. Senghor tilted the scale towards French, which became the official language. One could also argue that the choice of French as the official language helped perpetuate the practices of power organized by the colonial administration in postcolonial state institutions (Cooper, 2014). It also served the interests of the political and intellectual elites educated in the French colonial system (known as the *ku jang ekool* or the *évolués* i.e. the 'advanced' people). Hence, in their positions of power, they could shield their access to state resources from the non-educated rural masses (Diaw, 1992).

In this regard, students leaving Senegal to be trained in Arab universities constituted a source of potential political dissent. In the 1960s, many of them, returning from their academic journey in Arab countries, distanced from or even broke their allegiance to the Sufi Brotherhoods, engaged in Islamic reformism and expressed a defiant political voice (Loimeier, 2005). Finding the Sufi brotherhood's practice of Islam too heterodox, reformists have been advocating for a return to practices that conform with their understanding of orthodox Islamic dogma (Loimeier, 2000, 2005; Cruise O'Brien, 2003; Gomez Perez, 2005a, 2005b; Otayek and Soares, 2009; Bâ, 2012). They have also criticized the predominant role of the Sufi orders in state politics, which Cruise O'Brien has called the 'Senegalese Social contract' (1992, 2002, see recent critics by Babou 2012). The brotherhoods limited access to a proper use of the Arabic language in Senegal

by restricting the comprehensive teaching of Arabic so as to guarantee their monopoly over the 'sacred language' (Cruise O'Brien, 1981: 28)

The state used to offer scholarships to the sons of major Sufi families. These were meant to exercise some control over the flow of students travelling to Arab countries and to strengthen the state's relationship with the Sufi Brotherhoods. This was however done at the expense of other students, who had often travelled to Arab countries in very difficult conditions in order to further their education. Unless they came from wealthy families, students often had to travel overland, and would stay and work in the countries they were travelling through for years before reaching the destined Arab country.

That is the state of affairs described by Sidy Lamine Niasse, born in 1950, in one of the most influential families of the Tijāniyya brotherhood. In 1984, he created one of the first private media groups, *Wal Fadjiri* and he describes himself as an *Arabisant* (Niasse, 2003). Between 1976 and 1978, after beginning a career in education, he decided to do as other members of his family and travelled to Cairo to study Law and Islamic Law at Al-Azhar University:

I really wanted to further my studies. So I left the country through my own means, on an adventure in the Arab world, just as most Arabisants did. I started my journey by taking the train that connected Dakar to Bamako. When I arrived in Bamako, I took a car to Segou. I always felt at home wherever I was, because there were always family members and hundreds of thousands of disciples in all of those countries. Then, I went to Ivory Coast and Ghana. After Ghana, I moved to Benin ... then Nigeria. What really mattered to me was to keep moving on. My final destination was Egypt. When I reached Lagos, I took the plane. I had been to Kaduna, to Jos and then to Kano. I then took the plane to Cairo. It took me one month and a half. It was not that long and I felt at home everywhere I went. For those who go there to work or to better their life, it can even last much longer, even years. (Interview with Sidy Lamine Niasse, Dakar, May 2014)

He describes himself as an adventurer who embarked on the path of his ancestors, travelling across the entire Sahel. This journey of discovery is important as it helps the traveller acquire prestige and legitimacy; at the end of this process, he masters Arabic and Islamic sciences, making him an *Arabisant*.

The formation of an Arabophone elite became more institutionalized in the first years following Senegal's Independence in 1960. Education agreements between Senegal and a number of Arab countries included the granting of scholarships to study in Arab countries. As explained above, most of these fellowships were first awarded to students issued from affluent families associated with the Sufi Brotherhoods. In reaction to this form of nepotism, the Association of Senegalese Students organized a demonstration in 1963 before the Senegalese embassy in Cairo to demand more scholarships allowing students to study abroad and the implementation of a meritocratic selection process. This led the Senegalese government to increase the number of scholarships. Thereafter, in 1963, Senegal's foreign policy consolidated the country's relations with North African countries. This was mostly due to Egyptian President Gamal

Abdel Nasser, who had vowed to awaken the Islamic community, strengthen the Non-Aligned Movement, and thus reactivate the historical relations which had existed between the Middle East, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, but had been temporarily *obscured by the European colonization* (Otayek, 2003–2004, 2014).

Despite increasing cooperation between Arab countries, Nasser's Pan-Arab nationalism met with scepticism in Senegal, in a political atmosphere dominated by the logic of the cold war and France's position as a regional hegemon. The Senegalese government thus opted for the status quo, maintaining the same close relationship with the Sufi brotherhoods that had been established by colonial authorities. In this context, the Arabo-Islamic elite was barely integrated in the system. The expansion of Arabic was seen as being connected to Islamism, which for Senegal's Francophone elite was too closely associated with the anti-colonial Islamic movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Given that almost all state elites in Senegal had been trained in French schools, they kept the graduates returning from Arab countries at arm's length from the positions of power. In reaction, the latter developed a fierce and aggressive religious discourse (Dia, 2015).

In sum, the choice of the language used throughout one's post-secondary education has become a divisive question in Senegal since Independence. Regardless of what one decides to study, be it engineering or theology, the language in which it is done can impact one's future. Reflecting on his own experiences, a journalist and manager of religious affairs for a large private media outlet, who spent 8 years in the Sudan studying Islamic Sciences at the African International University in Khartoum and Journalism at the University of Omdurman, explains:

Knowledge is not really about religion. Arabic might be a means to learn, but it is not knowledge per se. Language is not knowledge, what matters is knowledge. So, differentiating between Arabisants and French-educated graduates creates intellectual discrimination. (Interview with A.D., Dakar, May 2014)

### **Studying Abroad: journeys of discovery to Arabo-Islamic education**

Today, the movement of Senegalese towards Arab-speaking countries is regulated by cooperation agreements on education and training. These agreements make provisions for the granting of scholarships (for secondary schools and universities) and training awards (internships) to students willing to further their studies abroad. In these scholarship programmes, the host country provides food, housing and health care to students, whereas Senegal provides allowances (payments are issued by the Management Department of Senegalese Student living abroad, based in Paris). H.S, an *Arabisant* in charge of the Office of Arab Countries in the Foreign Scholarships Division at the Ministry of Education

and Research, explains that *Every year, there are some countries that stick to the number of scholarships they habitually offer and others that are just inconsistent. They can spend years without awarding scholarship* (Interview with H.S., Dakar, May 2014). Egypt, Morocco, the Sudan, Tunisia and Algeria offer most of these scholarships, followed by Libya, Turkey, Kuwait and Iran. Each country has its own selection criteria. Management prepares a list of preselected successful candidates and the host country makes the final selection through its embassy in Senegal. Selection can be done through an examination or an interview in order to assess the language proficiency of candidates. In 2013/2014, Morocco granted 100 scholarships to universities, among which four were given to the Faculty of Sharia and four to the Faculty of Arabic languages (Communication from the Minister of Higher Learning and Research; n°001677, Dakar 02/07/2013). Egypt offers two types of scholarships: those offered by Al-Azhar University to secondary schools in order to first complete a baccalaureate diploma and then to proceed to higher learning at Al-Azhar; and those offered by the government (three on average) (Interview with M.S, Dakar, April 2014). To obtain the latter, the recipients must hold a baccalaureate degree acquired in the Egyptian public educational system. This explains why these scholarships are not granted in Senegal, but rather to Senegalese students based in Egypt. They are hence subject to less competition. In 2014/2015, Al-Azhar University awarded 22 scholarships, 20 to secondary schools and 2 to students at the Master's level.

Senegalese candidates come from three different backgrounds: students who obtained their baccalaureate through public schools, graduates of Franco-Arabic public schools<sup>1</sup> and graduates of Franco-Arabic private schools. The creation of an Arabic baccalaureate by the state in 2013<sup>2</sup> gave students from Franco-Arabic public schools and Arabo-Islamic private schools access to public universities, thereby granting them the opportunity to obtain a state diploma that is internationally recognized. This is supposed to help solve the problem of equivalences and access to Arab universities. Until very recently, Senegalese students could not gain any equivalence for their diplomas obtained in Senegal, leading them to undertake very lengthy studies abroad and to settle permanently in their host countries.

In parallel with this more institutionalized academic migration, some Senegalese students choose to study abroad without securing the institutional support of their home and host countries through scholarships even though they could benefit from social scholarships given by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research after having registered in an Arab University. Moreover, some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar do not involve Senegal in the student selection process. Rather, they implement competitive examinations in their embassies. The recruitment of students can also be handled directly by private Arab Schools and Universities in Senegal. M.D., a translator and Head of the Communication Division at the United Arab Emirates embassy explains:

Owners of private schools in Senegal were the ones to put forward their students with the best profiles. The fact that a student won a scholarship to further his study abroad gave publicity to the institution. So, they were doing everything they could to send most of their students abroad. (Interview with M. D., Dakar, May 2014)

M.D. was born around 1973. He is from the Tijâniyya brotherhood and was trained at the private Franco-Arabic school in Mbour. Having won a scholarship to study at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, he obtained a Bachelor's degree in Language and Arab Civilizations after four years. Students build on the cultural and symbolic (spiritual) capital they acquire during their Arabo-Islamic education and benefit from networks in Senegal which encourage them to study abroad, in Arab countries.

Despite the diversity of candidates' academic backgrounds at the moment of their departure from Senegal, a large majority of them are geared towards the study of religion and Islamic law. Over the past 30 years, Al-Azhar University has strengthened its recruitment system in Sub-Saharan Africa. After Sudan, Senegal is the second African country to benefit from it (Sall, 2009: 551, Bava & Sall, 2013). Between 1962 and 2006, only a small proportion of students at the Master's level at Al-Azhar were enrolled in Applied Sciences such as Agronomy or Medicine and in professional training such as Educational Sciences, Business and Translation (21 per cent, or 109 students). Seventy-nine per cent (423 students) of them were enrolled in the faculty of Islamic sciences: Sharia and Law, the foundation of religion and theology, da'wa and pedagogy. Al Azhar has not authorized foreign students to register for free in non-Islamic programmes since the 1990s. Students were almost systematically directed towards literary or theological studies because the host institutions considered them to be future imams charged with the responsibility of Islamizing their indigenous society, with Africa having long been considered the weakest link of the Islamic *Umma* (Otayek, 1988).

M.S reminds us that during his time spent in Cairo in the 1980s, Jadul-Haqq, Vice-chancellor et al. Azhar University between 1982 and 1996, travelled around Africa and he eventually:

realised that the policy of Al-Azhar was not effective, as their Sub-Saharan graduates cannot reach decision-making levels and become stunted at a level where they cannot do more than establishing Islamic Institutions. Students trained in local public universities are the ones making decisions on their behalf. Even if the former have good degrees and certificates, they cannot Islamise elites, for their level of influence is too low once they return to their native countries. (int. op.cit.)

This institutional effect contributes to a feeling of deep frustration among certain students who wish to enrol in technical or applied programmes. Moreover, there is now a greater demand for teachers trained in the scientific and technical domains due to the increase in the number of Franco-Arabic schools and the creation of the Arabic baccalaureate.

## The return to Senegal and the obstruction of professional careers

The cultural venues of Islamic migration between West Africa and the Arab countries have led to the creation of a genuine space of knowledge, nurtured with exchanges between clerics and intellectuals in-between the two shores of the Sahara (Kane and Triaud, 1998). Experiencing a form of 'discovery movement', students reconnect their own academic paths with the mythical ones of the great shaykhs, brokers of knowledge and religion in that region. However, they are quickly confronted with the harsh realities of daily life in the Arab world: financial insecurity, lengthy studies, racism and a sense of isolation (Bava, 2014). As a result, most Senegalese students who study in Arab countries do not plan to stay and work in these countries. M.D. explains: *I did not go to study abroad to stay there. I knew that I had to return home. And I thought that I could come back home and if this did not work out, I could return abroad.* (int. op.cit.). Upon their return to Senegal, graduates are faced with several challenges concerning their professional reintegration. Firstly, in the 1960s and 1970s, graduates who came back from Arab universities could find a job in the public service if they also mastered French. But since the 1990s, there are far fewer employment opportunities, especially in the public service.

Secondly, there is no systematic equivalence for the degrees acquired in Arab countries. It is especially problematic for those who graduated in scientific fields, given that they have acquired their scientific knowledge in Arabic, whereas Senegal predominantly uses French (or English, to a lesser extent) as the language of science in the formal sector. Therefore, *Arabisants* have developed strategies to bypass the constraints of the national system. Some of them furthered their studies in Europe to pursue doctorates: *When you study in France and obtain a doctorate, this masks the former degrees* (Interview with M.S., op. cit.). After Europe tightened its visa policy from the 1990's, some *Arabisants* turned to Morocco to obtain a degree in French. M.D.'s journey is very enlightening: after obtaining his Bachelor's degree in Arabic Language and Civilization at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia (during which time he pursued a Senegal-based Advanced French Language Diploma (DALF in French) by correspondence), he wanted to leave for Geneva to set-up a School of Translation but could not obtain a visa. He therefore started a Master's degree in Modern Literature with a focus on Arabic poetry. With his work portraying the image of Africa in contemporary Arabic poetry, he obtained a scholarship from the Saudi Arabian government to pursue a Doctorate and collect data in Morocco four times a year. He took advantage of his time in Morocco to obtain a diploma from the School of Translation at the Abdelmalek Essaâdi University in French, Arabic and English, stating: *This was a good strategy that was well planned.*

Thirdly, though some *Arabisants* are able to mobilize the available resources to successfully manage their professional project, many of them are forced to opt for a career that has nothing to do with what they studied in Arab countries.

Upon their return to Senegal, many *Arabisants* have been denied the expected positions in the professional field they were trained for, so they turned to what Sidy Lamine Niasse call 'chalk' professions:

They return with the best degrees in the world, as doctors or agricultural engineers, but the majority of them are given a chalk and are told to be school teachers! The chalk is not an end in itself, it must be a stepping stone to the active life. (int. op. cit.)

Their mastery of the Arabic allows them to find jobs at the Ministry of Education, as managers in the Division of Arabic teaching, as inspectors or teachers in the public or private schools, or, for very few of them, as university professors. A.D. states: *You must teach or remain unemployed* (int. op. cit.). Some go into translation, interpretation, religious media and, more exclusively, diplomacy when they are from wealthy families and bear some cultural capital. The other option for graduates of medical or engineering schools is to choose a career in the private sector. Also, it is not unusual for some to lead charitable organizations (e.g. the Emirati *Sharjah Charity Association*) in Arab countries, to create NGOs or to assist in the opening of Arabo-Islamic schools (e.g. the Emirati *Human Appeal International*). Once back in Senegal, graduates often maintain friendships and professional networks in the Middle East through Alumni associations of various Arab universities. Through these networks, graduates want young students to not limit themselves to an Arabic or religious curricula, even if, as we have seen, the system strongly encourages it:

I translate the documents for most of the students who go to Saudi Arabia. And on average, there are 20–25 of them per year. Most of them register for Sharia. But there is also Arabic, Journalism and Translation they can do now. I also sensitize some students; I tell them not to concentrate only on religious studies and that it is necessary to think of one's future. I even gave them the example of my academic journey. And there are about four to five of them who have had the same journey as myself, that is to say, that they took advantage of their stay over there to finance their studies, perfect their level in French or even in English and as a result became good translators. (Interview with M.D., op.cit.)

The creation of a mentorship system between the graduates and younger students has led to the creation of Arabic-speakers' professional networks in Senegal. Mastery of Arabic is particularly valued therein because of its association with the moral qualities of integrity, virtue and professionalism, which are implicitly linked to religion.

### **Arabo-Islamic system reforms and the duality of educational public policy**

*Arabisants* face forms of stigmatization and symbolic violence that lead them to often express uncertainty and frustration. On one hand, they are subjected to various forms of disrepute and devaluation in Arab societies, where they are questioned about their ability to speak Arabic and to be *real* Muslims. On the other hand, upon their return in their home country, some of their compatriots

question the adequacy of their education or even consider them illiterates. The predominance of the Francophone elite has prevented these graduates from gaining access to positions of power in the Senegalese institutional and political system.

Therefore, the Arabic-speaking community has engaged in political advocacy on the issue of Arabo-Islamic education. With the development of a private Arabo-Islamic educational sector, the state has proposed an *opening*, especially in terms of employment opportunities, within the Senegalese public service. In 1986, Arab education gained formal recognition with the creation of the Division of Arab Education (DEA in French, see Hugon, 2016) in the Ministry of Education in an effort to identify and regulate this new private Arabo-Islamic sector. Former President Abdoulaye Wade, brought to power in 2000, accelerated these public reforms. In 2002, the government introduced optional religious education classes in the public primary school curriculum, created public Franco-Arabic schools within the DEA, launched a modernization of the *daaras* (scripture schools) and created a baccalaureate diploma in Arabic. This set of reforms was *part of the strategy to diversify the educational offer and aimed to introduce more equality in the Senegalese education system* (DEA, 2015). The reforms reflect the institutionalization of Arabic, paving the way for a greater integration of Arabic-speakers into the public institutional system notably leading to the opening of an Arabic section within the National School of Administration (ENA) and the project of an Arabo-Islamic University, launched by President Macky Sall (in office since 2012) for holders of a baccalaureate in Arabic. The idea is to develop a recruitment pool for future teachers of courses taught in Arabic in Franco-Arab public schools.

The advocacy of the Arab-speaking community resonates with the international norms set by donors towards universal access to education (Charton and Fichtner, 2015). Senegalese political authorities have implemented the Arabo-Islamic educational sector reforms since the 2000s while simultaneously being confronted with the directives set by various foreign and international donors promoting the goal of universal education by the year 2015. Educational programmes, implemented to reach universal literacy and education in Senegal, generated a flow of financial support linked to policy benchmarks from international donors (UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, USAID, Islamic Development Bank), who introduced various pilot programmes, especially based on the modernization of *daaras* (Hugon, 2016).

These reforms, however, only target the integration of Arabic-speakers into teaching professions. *Arabisants* whom I have interviewed wish the reforms had been much more ambitious and comprehensive, as was demanded by the mobilization platform [www.arabisants.org](http://www.arabisants.org). On the eve of the 2012 Senegalese presidential election, a memorandum was presented to the presidential candidates encouraging Senegal to exhibit its 'Arabic culture': *This [Eastern and Western] double historical and geo-political affiliation should be better exploited*

and considered as a comparative advantage<sup>3</sup>. The document was prefaced by reknown Senegalese Professor Ousmane Kane (Harvard University). The memorandum was sponsored by the Union of Senegalese graduates of Egypt (USDE) and signed openly by 287 people on the aforementioned web platform (including Mansour Ndiaye, a marginal presidential candidate in 2012). The initiator of the project, M.Y. Sall, a lecturer and researcher in engineering at Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, explains his purpose:

This petition was to influence the campaign, to refocus the debate a bit, to say: Arabisants must be a topic of debate during the election campaign (...) I wanted to prepare a list of names to show the candidates that there were many signatories, for them to know that this concerns is shared among all sections of the Senegalese population. (Interview, Dakar, April 2014)

For the *Arabisants*, the mobilization was necessary since they believed there was an urgent need to review the education system, which was seen as having a dual and discriminatory character:

The direction taken by the state is to create a two-tier school system: keeping the official system and at the same time modernizing the daaras. The modernization of the daaras is simply a means of equipping those who were trained in classical schools [Arab and Islamic] with some baggage to integrate the official school system. The official school system, they will not touch it. For them it is perfect, but we must adapt the Arab-Islamic system. My children attend their school but Arabic is not even taught there. The state says that it is taught, but this is not the case. It is only because without it, they face difficulties in getting the 100 per cent from the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). If they were serious, they would have a basic education program that incorporates Arabic because it is a required skill to live in our society and because sooner or later, as a Senegalese or as a Muslim, you will need it. (int. op.cit.)

The *Arabisants* criticize the reform of the Arab-Islamic education implemented by President Wade, arguing that it does not solve the problem, but instead emphasizes the duality of the public education system. The creation of a public system taught in Arabic would increase the training of Arabic-speaking students without providing them with more job opportunities, because the state will no longer be able to absorb these cohorts of new graduates into the public service. The risk is that this can lead to the creation of two public systems working in parallel, as is the case in Egypt with Al-Azhar University and Cairo University, two public universities, the first specializing only in the teaching of religious sciences. Activist discourse increasingly stresses the demand for an integrated system that supports both the classical and official school: *The integrated school is only to give the Senegalese more freedom*.<sup>4</sup> They denounce the slow movement of the reforms undertaken since 2000 and the existence of what they call spiritual apartheid:

Macky Sall' reform of the Arab-Islamic educational system is a positive thing. But, there are still many good things we should do. What they are doing now should have been done since 1960. We are so late! The responsibilities are shared: governmental, religious, social, because we cannot have what is called a spiritual apartheid or cultural property. The modernisation of the daaras and French-Arabic

schools, are good models, but it is still not enough. This is only a drop of water in the desert. (Interview with A.D. op.cit.)

### **A shift from linguistic issues to religious discourse: an impediment to political activism**

In order to be pro-active on the education issue, *Arabisant* activists want to take on an increasingly prominent political role. However, they face two major structural and organizational constraints that prevent them from doing so. First, Arabic-speakers are seen as a social elite rather than a political one. Though they are endowed with the prestige spawned by their experience abroad and their mastery of Arabic, the language of the Koran, this prestige does not translate into effective political careers:

They cannot achieve some political or economic positions. They are blocked. They cannot be Minister or President. Society does not see an Arabisant as a member of the political elite because his training is religion-based. He is not seen as someone who will use Arabic for something else [than religion]. It is even prohibited to do politics. So finally, Arabists are stuck in this position, even if they have undertaken modern training such as medicine. When an Arabisant speaks about politics, he is told not to: 'Stay in your marabout domain!' They [Francophone elite] use the opportunity to say that and benefit from it. (Interview with M.Y. S., op. cit.)

Because of these logics of social demarcation, Arabic-speakers have long been excluded from the Senegalese public space in favour of the Francophone elite. They are allowed to evolve and speak in specific social boundaries, such as in the media. Arabophones have long been confined to sermons broadcasted on national radio and television that dealt with religious and civic education and encouraged to avoid addressing any political issues. But in the 1990s, the creation of a large number of private media outlets allowed *Arabisants* to expand their role. They were able to promote a religious discourse on *the moralization of the social and political contract defining the community* [in which] (...) *Islam will become a factor of political awareness (...) and will promote a rebellion against the West which is largely associated to its colonial history* (Seck, 2010: 220). For instance, the religious programme *Kaddy Diiiné Ji* (the voice of religion) of Imam Dame Ndiaye, an *Arabisant* trained in Economics in Iraq, is broadcasted on Fridays on 2STV television (created in 2003 with programmes in Wolof and other national languages). The programme discusses a wide variety of topics, ranging from female circumcision to the death penalty, as well as family planning and gender equality.

These changes in the media landscape have enabled *Arabisants* to alter their role: from preachers they have become community spokespersons. Arabic-speakers can now openly participate in public debates. They can express divergent opinions from the official state discourse and represent members of their own community. Refined and sharpened within the media space, their discourse

has gone from the defence of the Arabic language to a more politicized position. On one hand, we notice that the debate on the use and recognition of Arabic in Senegal is entrenched in a very strong anti-colonialist rhetoric:

Speaking Arabic is a form of resistance against colonization. Colonization is a whole: it is cultural, economic and even spiritual. It tried to erase everything that was there. But here, Islam and Arabic were chosen. I am among those who believe that Arabic is an African language, a lively and written language. The majority of Arabs are in Africa. So, to develop my country, we need Arabic. There are other languages [national languages] but they are not written or as widely shared as Arabic. We must not let any other children grow up without learning Arabic.

As a result of this anti-colonialist criticism, *Arabisants* now seem to agree on the need to denounce the negative connotations associated with Salafism or Wahhabism in western countries while reiterating that the practice of Islam in Senegal and in Africa is not just a replication of the 'Arab' model: *We have learned with the Arabs, but it is not necessarily their views that should guide us. Orientalists* [meaning Senegalese *Arabisants* trained and socialized in Europe] *give negative views of Salafism and fundamentalism. These concepts are positive notions in Senegal.* (Interview with S. L. Niasse, op. cit). On the other hand, we notice that members of *Arabisants* can emphasize the link between Arabic and Islam according to the issues they address. This link is emphasized only sparingly when it comes to promoting the importance of Arabic, whereas it is used repeatedly when it comes to apprehending religion and social issues that Senegalese Muslims face in their everyday life:

When you master the language, you can master your religion. You can read your prayers in Arabic and learn on your own. This is not what happened with our parents who did not go to the daaras, but rather were educated in the official school system. Once at the age of 50, they needed to say prayers, but they needed to be taught how to do so. They write them in French, but it is not the same. Sometimes, they are even ashamed. (Ibid).

Through the media, *Arabisants* openly take positions based on their religious beliefs on issues such as family planning, female genital mutilation or the Family Code (Brossier, 2004), positions which reflect a conservative ideology.

Secondly, rather than constituting a structured activist organization, Arabic-speakers form a heterogeneous social group. They are experiencing strong divisions on approaches to education in Arabic and Islam, which prevent them from rallying and speaking with one political voice. This explains why they concentrate their efforts on promoting the Arabo-Islamic education reform. We can identify some of these divisions (Brossier, 2010): the first one is the division between Arabic-speakers trained in Arab countries and those trained in the local Arab-Islamic system. The second concerns the practice of Islam among Arabic-speakers returning home from Arab countries: there are those who support the reformist movement and those who remained affiliated to the Sufi Brotherhoods. The third division is based on social networks, which are formed either through the membership in the brotherhoods or through experiences

abroad. The interactions of these overlapping divisions determine the consistency [or absence thereof] of the political posture and discourse of the various *Arabisants* associations. The fourth division concerns the affiliation (or absence thereof) to the Movement for the Reform and Social Development in Senegal (MRDS in French), which adopts a conservative ideology in accordance with the Islamic reformist movement positions.

All these lines of divisions inhibit the formation of a homogeneous movement that speaks with one voice. Consequently, the forms of political mobilization are limited to initiatives geared towards the promotion of the Arabic language and the reformation of the education system. Therefore, the activist organizations established in the late 2000s focus on the linguistic identity or the community: the Circle of Arabic executives (CCA) in 2006, the Union of Senegalese graduates of Egypt (USDE) in 2008 and the Alliance of Arabic speakers of Senegal (AAS) in 2013. Within dominant political parties, a sensibility towards the Arabic language has emerged. The *Alliance pour la République* (APR) party of the new President, Macky Sall, encompasses a structure named Circle of Republicans Arabic speakers (CAR). These organizations advocate for the recognition of the skills of their members and demand a sustained integration in both universities and the public service.

## Conclusions

The path of the *Arabisants* in Senegal is best understood through the long-standing tension between Arabic and Islam, that is, between language and religion. This dichotomy undoubtedly explains their weak influence in Senegalese politics. This situation is paradoxical, especially when one considers the prestige garnered by speaking Arabic in a predominantly Muslim population where only a few are fluent Arabic-speakers. Due to the ruling position of the Francophone elite, Arabic-speakers have been confined in the religious and social spheres and kept away from the political one. In Senegal, Arabic is seen as the language of the Koran. It is not seen as a means for academic and scientific knowledge. Therefore, once back in Senegal, students trained in the Arab countries, become the victims of a linguistic and social compartmentalization.

Even though Arabic has been seen as the 'sacred language', the learning and use of this language has experienced unprecedented development since the 1990s. Arabic is used by citizens of Senegal in their practice of Islam, but Arabic-speakers are increasingly willing to speak the language at work and to debate in the public sphere.

As linguistic entrepreneurs, Arabic-speakers have engaged in various forms of political advocacy by investing themselves in the educational field to promote literacy and to increase the number of Arabic-speakers. Reforms undertaken in the 2000s to improve education in Arabic reflect the growing influence of the *Arabisants* on public authorities. Arabic-speakers occupying influential positions

(media, diplomacy, public administration, etc.) are now capable of mobilizing symbolic and material resources through national and transnational networks created from migratory experiences. Activism in educational issues has contributed to the restructuring of Arabo-Islamic private education in Senegal. This Islamic educational market has spawned two movements: the rejection of Sufi traditional religious education forms and a modernization dynamic in which modernity constitutes the 'reinvention' of Islamism. This 'reinvented modernity' (Bâ, 2012) materialized especially in the aforementioned new Islamic educational institutions, which are oriented towards the development of a culture of bilingualism (French and Arabic) and the development of national languages for the entire Senegalese population.

State officials have acceded to these linguistic, cultural and religious demands, and to the benchmarks laid out by international organizations in terms of literacy and enrolment rates, which were formulated around *School for All* (EFA) and the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs). The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) implemented since the 1980s initiated the liberalization of the education system. These opened the way for the development of the Arabo-Islamic educational sector and the deepening of bilateral cooperation with Arab countries, including Egypt, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Another recent development associated with the rise of private Arabo-Islamic schools is the growing importance of non-state funding sources. In effect, there has been an increase in the funding channelled through private Islamic institutes and Arab NGO's on the ground. The nebulous development of these networks addresses the lack of educational alternatives in rural regions, crowded suburbs of Dakar and other large cities, and is often associated with radical forms of Islam. This informal funding is becoming a matter of national concern in state discourses, as it is allegedly linked with the spread of radical Islamism. President Macky Sall, present chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas), strongly denounced terrorism in West Africa in the aftermath of the attacks of Paris and Bamako in November 2015:

The model of Islam we have adopted in Africa, in particular in West Africa, is tolerant and moderate. We do not accept that [the Muslim extremists] impose another form of religion. Under the pretext that 'Africans are poor', they want to fund mosques and schools to impose their culture or tradition! We must refuse it, as Africans! (International Forum on Peace and Security, Dakar, 10/11/2015)

The funding of private schools and Islamic institutes, which are unregulated by the state even though they rely on local human assets, is a key issue in the restructuring of education today in Senegal. Individual experiences of radicalization in Sahelian trans-regional networks of radical Islam and the creation of ' sleeper cells ' are major challenges for the national Arabophone community, which seeks to increase its integration and escape exclusion from decision-making positions. Some community members play the role of whistle-blowers and recall the fundamental role of education as a bulwark against rampant and

diffused radicalism. As such, certain Arabophone intellectuals have become more visible in the national public sphere. They also constitute important assets sought by international actors for their expertise.

Popular images of success have changed as the University and the old figure of the *évolué* have lost momentum in Africa: academic qualifications no longer fulfil the promises with which they were once identified. Meanwhile, people who have invested in education still need to find places where their skills can be of social and political value. The distress of Arabic intellectuals led to 'wars of moralities' which affect public opinion and allow competing archetypes to emerge. Determining what and who should be deemed exemplary and defining figures of authority in Senegalese society is much more ambiguous in contemporary Senegal than it was in the early post-Independence era (Dahou & Foucher, 2004).

In this context, it is not surprising that Arabophones have become more visible as they try to organize and develop strategic (including political) activist networks in their efforts to attract the government's attention. Indeed, Arabophones claim to represent the 95 per cent of the Senegalese population who are Muslims. The rise of Arabophones alongside the Francophone elite in the public and political spheres has led to the competitive co-existence of two different intellectual groups which are not comparable in terms of history, numbers and coherence, but are both fighting to preserve or expand their legitimacy and ability to represent the masses. The Arabic-speaking elite wants to be recognized for their multilingualism just as the French-speaking elite are. They want to close the book of colonial legacy and have therefore decided to seize upon the language issue as a way to restore a common national history and identity that have hitherto been forged in a fragmented fashion by different elites in different languages. This then raises the question of the continued coexistence of Francophone and Arabophone elites leading different societal projects. They are cultivating opposing views on education: Francophones support an education taught and learned in French, whereas Arabophones support an education taught and learned in both French and Arabic. Both of them agree that Arabo-Islamic education must be strengthened. The Arabophone community publicly expresses its concern that the education reforms implemented by the state will lead to two types of citizens produced by two educational systems. This state of affairs raises the possibility of a future disintegration of society, as these two types of citizens will both exist, but may not do so in a peaceful manner. To avoid this conflict, *Arabisants* promote a Senegalese endogenous Islamic cultural heritage whose contours have been set in Arabic as a solid base to rebuild a 'common destiny'. They intend to no longer present themselves as a 'marginalized' elite (Abdoullaye, 2003), but rather as an emerging counter-elite in the public and political sphere in Senegal.

## Notes

1. Starting with 8 Franco-Arabic schools opened in 2002 in 5 different regions (Diourbel, Kaolack, Louga, St Louis, Kolda) and 347 students, the numbers increased to 527 schools in 2014 distributed across all regions with 63 018 primary school students (of which 51 per cent are girls) (DEA, 2015).
2. Decree No 2013-913 of 1 July 2013 introducing the Arabo-Islamic Baccalaureate and Franco-Arabic Baccalaureate : in 2013, 2156 over 2248 students enrolled in the Arabic Baccalaureate, 467 over 2156 passed their exams (21,7 per cent) (the Watch Committee on the Arabo-Islamic education, Dakar, 06/11/2013).
3. See the following website: [http://www.arabisants.org/Arabisants\\_Appel\\_Complet2.pdf](http://www.arabisants.org/Arabisants_Appel_Complet2.pdf).
4. Ibid.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche [grant number 11-FRAL-009]; Fonds de Recherche du Québec-Société et Culture [grant number 175311].

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