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# From East to West: Looking at Responses to Modernization in Senegal and Turkey from a Comparative Perspective

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Hilary Jones

*Faith is not enough in the twentieth century to move mountains. We live in a century of science and technology.*

Léopold Sédar Senghor, speaking to a group  
of Dakar medical students in 1963<sup>1</sup>

*I tell you as your own brother, as your friend, as your father, that the people of the Turkish Republic who claim to be civilized must show and prove that they are civilized by their ideas and their mentality, by their family life and their way of living...*

Speech of Mustapha Kemal Atatürk on the  
importance of dress reform, October 1927<sup>2</sup>

Today when one mentions Senegal to the Turkish or Turkey to the Senegalese, immediately both groups think of the 2002 World Cup Soccer tournament in which Turkey defeated Senegal with a score of 1–0 in the quarterfinals. In a tournament described as “an example of a World Cup in which teams with less World Cup experience and success have shown great impact such as Turkey, South Korea, Senegal, and Japan,” the tournament represented a breakthrough for competition between countries outside of the traditionally dominant teams of Western Europe and Latin America.<sup>3</sup> When asked about the 2002 games, my Senegalese friends admitted their disappointment and slight resentment at Turkey for preventing Senegal’s Lions from the possibility of being the first African team to make it to the World Cup finals. Turks, on the other hand, recall the superior athletic skills demonstrated by their team, the Galatasary, and expressed their joy at having eliminated the upset African team to move on to the semi-final round.

While Senegalese and Turkish football fans shared these anecdotes with the humor and competitiveness that goes along with good

sportsmanship, their impressions of the event reveal something much deeper. Although both Senegal and Turkey faced similar challenges in grappling with the cultural and social changes that came about as a result of Western influence and the push towards modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries, rarely do we examine their histories from a comparative perspective. More importantly, because Senegal is often viewed as a “small” country in sub-Saharan Africa that did not make the same contribution to world civilization as the Ottoman Empire, we often think that Senegal has more to learn from Turkey than the reverse. What lessons might a closer examination of Senegal’s responses to Westernization have to teach other non-Western and predominantly Muslim societies like Turkey about the coexistence of Islam and the West in the modern era?

This essay looks at two periods of reform in Senegal and Turkey. I begin with an examination of French attempts to “modernize” Senegal as part of their imperial project in the late 19th century and compare it to the ways in which the 19th-century Ottoman Sultans attempted to remake the image of their state by introducing Western influences into the material structures and administrative apparatuses of the empire. The second part of the essay considers the 19th-century reforms in relation to the 20th-century changes instituted by Mustapha Kemal Atatürk, the architect of the Turkish Republic, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of independent Senegal. A comparison of the move toward Westernization in both Senegal and Turkey shows the inherent adaptability of both societies to change. Moreover, such an analysis raises intriguing questions about the responses of their leaders to the modern era and the implications for creating modern societies that have embraced the West yet remain rooted in their African or Islamic identities.

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The Senegal River, which forms the northern border of modern-day Senegal, originates in the mountain ranges of the eastern region of the country. Then it travels north, overlooking the southern edge of the Sahara desert, and it finally empties out into the Atlantic Ocean. Sitting at the intersection of the Atlantic world and the East, this country has been shaped by centuries of interaction with Arab traders and Muslim scholars who traveled the trans-Saharan trade routes, as well as European travelers and merchants who established settlements on

the coast to profit from the Atlantic slave trade. The French presence in Senegal dates back to 1650, when France established militarized forts on the islands of Saint Louis and Gorée to secure their monopoly over mercantile commerce and the trade in slaves from this region. By 1850, French influence changed from just holding an isolated commercial outpost on the coast to becoming a territorial empire as it embarked on wars of conquest in the interior. By the end of the 19th century, France consolidated its control over the colony of Senegal and established cash crop production in the country's peanut basin to ensure exports of raw goods for oil factories in Bordeaux and Marseille.

In the eyes of French officials, Saint Louis, as the oldest and most prestigious French settlement in the region, not only served as the commercial and administrative capital of the colony of Senegal but acted as the center from which French influence would spread across its vast West African empire. France justified her imperial aims by promoting the idea of France's unique civilizing mission. The logic of French colonialism, therefore, rested on the notion that France would bring the "dark continent" into the modern world by introducing the black African population to Christianity, democracy, and free trade.

One of the first reforms instituted by French administrators in Senegal concerned the construction of a Grand Mosque to serve the growing population of Muslim residents on the north side of the island of Saint Louis. Although the Muslim community initiated the plans to build the mosque, the colonial administration approved the project and oversaw the design and construction of the monument. Completed in 1847, the mosque was built in an "arabo-byzantine" style, with gothic colonnades and arches unlike the typical Sudanese-style mosques common in the interior of West Africa. Most strikingly, a clock was placed on the façade of the minaret. In choosing to place the clock in the location where the *muezzin* announces the five daily calls to prayer, the French attempted to introduce the new rhythms of the modern workday to the community and demonstrate the idea of progress and advancement associated with the imperial power.

The Saint Louis mosque served as an important symbol of the growing power of the Muslim community in the French town. French administrators, in particular, realized the necessity of accommodating the Muslim population in the region. In 1854, France appointed Louis Léon César Faidherbe as Governor of Senegal. Having served as a military officer in Algeria before arriving in Senegal, Faidherbe understood the importance of making France appear sympathetic to the local

Muslim population, since the region had been affected by a wave of *jihads* in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that sought to reform the leadership of the old aristocracy and impose stricter adherence to Islam. Known as the architect of French expansion, Faidherbe introduced a series of reforms in the towns that created Muslim schools and tribunals modeled on French institutions. Despite the logic of France's civilizing mission, administrators "on the ground" avoided interfering in the private lives of local inhabitants and, thus, went about transforming the face of Islamic institutions while leaving the personal beliefs and cultural practices of Senegal's Muslim population intact.

During this same period, the Ottoman Empire was increasingly influenced by Enlightenment ideas coming from the West. Although Ottoman rulers sent diplomatic missions to Western Europe in the 18th century to gain knowledge of intellectual, political, and industrial developments in these lands, it was only in the 19th century that evidence of Westernization appeared more visible in the institutions and structures of the Sultanate. Located on the western bank of the Marmara Sea, overlooking the Bosphorus straits that separate Europe from Asia, Dolmabahçe Palace exemplifies the powerful impact of Western aesthetics on the material life of the Ottoman rulers in the mid-19th century.

In 1844, Sultan Abdülmecid (1839–1861) commissioned his royal architects to design a new palace to replace Topkapı, which had served as the residence of the Sultan and his royal family for nearly four centuries. Completed in 1856 for a total of five million Ottoman gold liras or the equivalent of 100 million U.S. dollars, Dolmabahçe imitated the palaces of the ruling class in Europe with its ostentatious baroque style, including a 4.5-ton English chandelier and a crystal staircase. While the many rooms continued to serve the same functions as in traditional palaces, the interior departed from Ottoman-style architecture. Rather than a complex of buildings that separated the harem from the treasury and the kitchen, all of the rooms in Dolmabahçe were incorporated under one impressive façade. Moreover, Sultan Abdulhamid (1876–1909) added a clock tower on the palace grounds. This addition is of particular significance since, unlike the French-designed mosque in Saint Louis, the royal architects avoided placing the clock on the face of the minaret. Instead, they built a separate clock tower next to the palace mosque. According to architectural historian Gunhan Danisman, the Sultan chose a distinct clock tower in order to illustrate

the modernity of the empire while not diminishing the importance of Islam in Ottoman society.<sup>4</sup>

For the elites of the Ottoman Empire, the Westernization of educational institutions, the military, legal structures, dress, and building styles all bolstered the power and influence of the state in world affairs. The 1868 opening of the Imperial Ottoman Lycée Galatasaray, for example, trained children of the elite to become future administrators and diplomats who were educated in French and familiar with Western administrative structures. Similarly, Ottoman rulers sought to Westernize their military in the 19th century in order to compete more forcefully with the modern armies of Western Europe. The 19th-century sultans introduced Western ideas in order to make the empire appear not as a decayed, aging imperial power but rather a strong, resilient, and dynamic state. In so doing, they modernized the structures of power but did not seek to remake the interior lives of the people.

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In the 20th century, people in Turkey and Senegal faced new challenges. Whereas rulers in the 19th century sought to preserve the social and political order already in place, leaders in this era had to confront the task of building a new nation and forging a new national identity that was simultaneously modern and uniquely Turkish or Senegalese. Mustapha Kemal Atatürk emerged as the leader of the new Republic of Turkey in 1923 while Léopold Sédar Senghor became the leader of the independent Republic of Senegal when France relinquished control over the colony in 1960. As charismatic figures who considered themselves “modernizers,” Senghor and Atatürk crafted new visions of state and society that they believed would allow their respective countries to compete in the 20th-century world.

Léopold Sédar Senghor inherited a country shaped by the legacy of colonialism and comprised of a variety of people who did not belong to the same ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups. As the first president of the independent Republic of Senegal, Senghor not only confronted the challenge of establishing stability for the new nation but also of unifying its people under a common national identity. A noted poet and philosopher, Senghor envisioned an independent Senegal that corresponded to his concept of *négritude*. *Négritude* represented the essence of the “African personality.” In his view, the ideal society remained

true to black African culture and sensibility while borrowing the most advanced technological and organizational forms from the West.

After France granted Senegal independence in June 1960, the country kept the same administrative structures, educational institutions, and legal frameworks put in place by the French during the colonial era. Senegal adopted a republican constitution, implemented a civil code based on the French model, and expanded on the limited number of French schools established by the colonial regime. To realize his vision of a new society founded on *négritude*, Senghor promoted the development of a black arts movement. He called for painters, playwrights, dancers, and musicians to work in contemporary idioms recognized by the West while bringing forth an inherent African sensibility. Furthermore, Senghor encouraged scholars to reexamine the precolonial past as well as Senegal's folklore and cultural practices to showcase her unique contributions to humanity.

Senghor did not eradicate Islam from the public life of the state but rather developed mechanisms to bring Muslim leaders and their constituents more closely into government and politics. He developed strong ties to leaders of Muslim brotherhoods and appointed key members of the Muslim majority and the Catholic minority to his government. As a Catholic man who came from a minority ethnic group, Senghor relied on the cooperation of Muslim authorities to legitimize his rule. The long history of tolerance between Catholics, "traditionalists," and Muslims produced an easier coexistence among religious groups, allowing them to see themselves as integral parts of the new nation. In using the concept of *négritude* as a framework for the Republic, Senghor chose a path toward "modernization" that demonstrated Senegal's openness to the West while maintaining its "African personality."

Mustapha Kemal Atatürk, on the other hand, sought to suppress the Islamic identity associated with the Ottoman past and highlight the modernity of the new Republic of Turkey. Elected president in 1923 after the dissolution of the Caliphate, Atatürk became the primary person responsible for redefining the nation. The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the last decades of the 19th century, the territorial disintegration of the state in the aftermath of World War I, and the war for independence against allied occupation left Turkey in a weakened state. For Atatürk, rebuilding Turkey's authority on the world stage involved fully embracing the notions of progress and modernity as exemplified by the West. From his perspective, Westernization did not simply mean

changing the structures of power but required a complete transformation of the private lives of the Republic's new citizens.

Specifically, the legislators in the new capital at Ankara set about redefining the role of Islam in Turkish society. Whereas Islamic leaders held great authority in legal, social, and educational matters under the Ottomans, Islam in republican Turkey came under the control of the state. The Constitution no longer acknowledged Islam as the country's official religion, Islamic schools were closed, and religious courts were abolished. In addition, Atatürk eliminated the order of dervishes that rose up in opposition to the Republic and closed down the lodges of all Islamic brotherhoods in the country. Moreover, the new state adopted a civil code modeled after French and Swiss civil law, which made secular law—not Islamic law—the arbiter of personal matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

Atatürk's reforms did not merely involve cosmetic changes for the ruling elite but sought to remake the modern citizen from the inside out. In doing so, Atatürk enacted official policies for dress reform. He abolished the fez, which served as a symbol of Islamic identity for the 19th-century sultans, and insisted that all men adopt the European-style bowler hat in its place. In addition, legislation replacing Ottoman Arabic with Turkish in Latin script as the language of instruction, education, and publication created a more "modern" *lingua franca* for the new nation. Finally, requiring that all Turkish people adopt surnames introduced a new concept of the family that hadn't existed before. Mustapha Kemal, in this way, became identified as Atatürk, "father of the Turks." In embarking on these reforms, Atatürk sought to re-create Turkey's image as a nation equal in all ways to those of the West, which to him represented progress and advancement.

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Today, daily life in Turkey has the appearance of being divided between a public exterior that is secular and modern, and a private interior that continues to uphold the Islamic beliefs and practices that were formed through the Ottoman Empire. Contemporary debate on the right of Muslim women who wear headscarves to benefit from public education, or the creation of state-supported Islamic schools, shows what sociologist Fatma Göçek calls the "tense co-existence between Islam and the West."<sup>5</sup>



Yet, in Senegal, a synthesis of African, Islamic, and Western influences is more apparent in all areas of society. Although French is the official language of the country, Wolof acts as the dominant language of communication for the majority of people. While jeans and tee-shirts are commonplace, most Senegalese continue to wear various forms of traditional dress, and prefer a daily meal of their favorite Senegalese dish. Islam plays a prominent role in how Senegalese people define themselves. Murals of the founders of local Sufi brotherhoods are visible on city streets just as religious texts and material goods from the Middle East are highly sought-after imports.

Turkey and Senegal have both had to grapple with the tremendous political, social, and cultural changes brought about in the modern era. The reforms instituted in the 19th century by the French in Senegal and the Ottomans in Turkey show that Westernization spread gradually since the new influences had to accommodate the beliefs and practices of local societies. As a result, the push towards Westernization in this era mainly affected the structures of power but not the lives of individuals within the larger society. French officials in Senegal introduced Western ideas to Islamic institutions but did not interfere with the legal, educational, or religious practices of the Muslim population. For Ottoman rulers in the 19th century, adopting Western influences in their dress, building styles, and organizational structures bolstered the power and authority of the state in relation to Western Europe. Incorporating Western ideas, technology, and tastes at the highest levels of society created a modern image for the state without diminishing the power of Islam in Ottoman society.

The “modernizers” of the 20th century, however, chose a different response to the challenges of the modern era. As the prefatory quotes by Senghor and Ataturk reveal, both men argued that in order to compete in the 20th century, their societies had to embrace the notion of progress and advancement embodied by the “civilized world.” Senghor realized that Senegal’s development relied upon the acceptance of modern technology and science yet he understood the importance of upholding black African identity, even if a new sense of “blackness” or “Senegaleseness” had to be reinvented from a diverse body of languages, religions, and ethnicities.

Ataturk, on other hand, believed that the only way to prove that Turkey belonged to the league of “civilized nations” was to remake Turkish people into “modern citizens.” Adopting the dress, comportment, habits, and lifestyle of the West provided a mechanism for inserting

the Turkish people into a world defined largely by the power of Western nations. This transformation, however, elevated the Republic at the expense of Islam. Regardless of the path chosen, shifting our gaze to look more closely at the impact of modernization on the formation of Senegalese and Turkish society in the 19th and 20th centuries gives a fresh perspective on the lessons that non-Western and predominantly Muslim societies can teach each other about the coexistence of East and West in the modern era. ●

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## Notes

1. Quoted from Janet Vaillant, *Black, French and African: A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 317.
2. Quoted in Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 269.
3. "Sen: Tur-Players and Coaches Quotes," 2002 FIFA World Cup, 22 June 2002, Seoul-Tokyo, <http://fifaworldcup.yahoo.com/02/en/020622/2/17i3.html>.
4. Gunhan Danisman, private conversation with author, Bogaziçi University, Istanbul, June 2004.
5. See Fatma Müge Göçek, "Contemporary Turkey: A Country of Tense Coexistence," in this volume.

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