# PREFACE

The process of arrival in a foreign place and of adjustment to anthropological fieldwork has been described as one involving a series of 'cultural disorientations' (Lienhardt 1987). The task I am faced with here is to achieve the opposite sense in the course of interpretation and analysis. This task entails, initially at least, orienting a reader to the object of study; from the outset, to plot a series of coordinates that refer to a locality, a set of people and a network of social relations. This task also refers to a set of coordinates in time and history. I am concerned with the western-most region of West Africa, an area in part covered by the present-day nation-state of Senegal, a one-time French colonial possession held as part of a swathe of territory across sub-Saharan Africa known as *l'Afrique Occidentale Française*. The period I attempt to embrace begins back in the late eighteenth century and connects with my own fieldwork in Senegal in the 1980s and mid-1990s. I am also concerned with a body of religious thought and practice – namely, Islam – that is confined neither to one place nor one ethnic or 'tribal' group. The object of my study, therefore, reaches across time and space, and is not limited by the conventional parameters of traditional anthropological analysis.

The historical presence of a world religion – Islam – in an ethnographic area poses intriguing problems: the analytic strategies of a number of disciplines converge on the issue of Islam, and the analyst situated at the confluence of these many interests may be swept in a number of directions. The pull of these many intellectual currents is strong. The question is: how to avoid potentially conflicting sets of analytical imperatives? For example, comparative religionists and scholars of Islamic studies would urge an emphasis on the analysis of forms of religion and religious institution in different locations, perhaps compared to a pure or parent type of the religion. Or again, historians of religion might recommend the tracing of patterns of diffusion of the faith and its evolution and adaptation within specific contexts. There are at least two competing perspectives here: one examines Islam in Africa, the other 'African Islam' (Evers Rosander and Westerlund 1997). From an anthropological point of view, the particularities of each cultural milieu have to be meshed with the sense of historical development and the possibility that cultural knowledge is not necessarily contained within

social boundaries that are conventionally recognised by analysts.

Evans-Pritchard's work on the Sanusi of Cyrenaica (1949) is instructive in this regard. In his case, the Sanusiyya, a Sufi Muslim brotherhood, represented a pan-regional movement with historical and cultural connections in the western Maghreb and with religious lodges (*zawiyas*) situated throughout north-east Africa and the Hijaz. Yet, his analysis was focused on the establishment of this brotherhood among the Bedouin of Cyrenaica, a region of present-day Libya. His was a study of history, of place and of cultural connection. Evans-Pritchard developed his views about history in the Marett Lecture of 1950, when he argued that the imperatives of historical analysis and those of anthropology are not necessarily opposed; indeed, they meet at the crossroads of interpretation. This present project is concerned with the strands of Islam found within a network of local West African communities; it is concerned too with how these communities intertwine to form a broader fabric of social and cultural life. Islam is not, however, a static entity, but is dynamic and has developed over time. This investigation thus involves a grasp of history and of historical transformation, and a sense for anthropological interpretation that together form points of orientation for the analysis.

This book is an attempt to marry history and anthropology. It is consequently neither a standard historical text nor is it a conventional anthropological monograph. If anthropology involves the interpretation of the lives of human beings situated in different spaces from the one we occupy, then history involves the interpretation of the lives of human beings situated in different times from our own. A union between these two perspectives is thus the challenge of this present work. I am primarily trained as a social and cultural anthropologist, and the historical dimension I have developed in the course of my research has been in response to the increasing realisation that synchronic perspectives alone are inadequate to the task of complex analysis of social process and transformation. In order to trace the genealogy of relationships that people forge in the course of their lives, and that in turn inform the contexts in which the lives of future generations are played out, a method of historical ethnography is required. The relationships I am concerned with revolve around the question of 'what it is to be a Muslim' in Senegal from the eighteenth century through to the present day. This question is not confined to issues of theology or religious doctrine, but concerns social identities of living communities of human beings who divide themselves up into different categories of people. What has been referred to as 'caste' in West Africa is one such way of dividing people into different categories. The history of the question 'what it is to be a Muslim' is also a history of responses from indigenous interpreters who attempt to negotiate their way through an array of possible social identities. I attempt to show that in some respects answers to this question from people

living within the Senegambian region show a remarkable consistency across time.

This work does not constitute an original piece of archival research since most of the historical sources I have used derive not from primary archives but from secondary published works. I examine these sources with a view to piecing together information and data scattered across a body of literature that allows for only a partial and fractured image to emerge of the relationship between members of caste groups and the religion of Islam at different historical periods. The sources, both primary and secondary, tend to focus on the dominant social groups of the region, those in positions of political authority or of religious ascendancy. To plot the traces of more marginal social groups of artisans, entertainers and musicians (the 'castes') is to plot the history of 'muted', 'subaltern' groups that have often been overlooked by commentators, chroniclers and others. Sources are often silent, gaps and lacunae appear, and inevitably only partial clues and traces are there to be detected and tracked down. The task of historical reconstruction is frustrating and sometimes incomplete, and it is at such moments that a historical and an anthropological imagination are drawn upon in order to fill out bolder connections between partial traces. All one can do is admit to this methodological device and to highlight its use at points in the text where it has been deemed appropriate. The responsibility for this imaginative engagement with historical material is mine alone.

This book builds upon my earlier social anthropological analyses of craftsmen, in particular weavers, as one among a set of social categories that are present in Fuuta Toro, the northern-most region of Senegal that runs along the south bank of the Senegal river. I have now broadened the perspective to embrace a more synthetic analysis of these social categories, and how they articulate a set of social relationships over time. The concept of caste, like that of the religion of Islam, does not constitute an essential category of analysis, but for me it brings to mind a set of social relationships of inclusion and exclusion, a set of dividing practices that have operated, *mutatis mutandis*, within the river valley over time.

The conventional anthropological focus on a specific place and the people who inhabit it does not adequately describe the movement contained within the present analysis. I begin my historical investigation by focusing on an Islamic revolution in Fuuta Toro in the late eighteenth century, and examine how this had implications for social relationships within the river valley. In some senses this might be considered a somewhat arbitrary starting point, but I take it also as a convenient and indeed crucial moment at the outset of this analysis, for I argue that it has importance for the redefinition of relations between an emergent group of ruling Islamic clerics and those with other social statuses. As the investigation develops, the compass of the study widens such that by the final chapter I examine

relationships between Islam and caste within the general area of Senegal. This analytical movement reflects a historical movement of people and ideas out from Fuuta Toro into neighbouring territories during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, the changes that occurred in Fuuta Toro in the eighteenth century were not the result of an immaculate conception, but were rather the product of a set of complex social and historical process from an earlier century that connected the region to the Moors and Berbers further to the north: a kind of 'Senegalo-Mauritanian' Islamic space. The people and ideas that subsequently moved south and east from Fuuta Toro into Senegambia and beyond in the period succeeding the revolution brought a version of Islam and consequent social upheavals through jihad or through passive means to existing kingdoms, chiefdoms and other polities of the area. The shift in anthropological focus of this work thus attempts to capture the shift in historical development of ideas and practices as they leached south and east from the river valley.

My own field research too mirrors in an inverted image this historical movement of people and ideas from Fuuta Toro. Early fieldwork between 1980 and 1982 and again in 1995 plotted a course from Dakar and the Cap Vert peninsula, where many weavers were then working, to Diourbel and Kaolack – two towns some 100 kilometres or more to the east and the south-east, both centres of cloth production and trade – and eventually back to Fuuta Toro, the place of origin of many of these craftsmen. Migration from Fuuta Toro and changes within the social and economic relations of cloth production formed an early focus of this research. Conceptions of social identity and questions of cultural difference became part of the study as the nature of 'caste' group membership emerged as a salient issue during fieldwork. What has subsequently become labelled as 'multi-sited' field research was for my part a pragmatic response to the attempt to trace networks of individuals moving across space over time. The historical impetus behind this present work might be construed as a counter-movement to the momentum set up by the dynamic of field research, reconstructing the flow of people and ideas from a period prior to the synchronic snapshot of one individual's fieldwork.

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