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# Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal

Codou Bop

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A new trend in research on Sufi brotherhoods attempts to assess the presence, visibility, and dynamism of Muslim women. According to their authors the Sufi brotherhoods, contrary to orthodox Islam, not only provide women with autonomous space to express their spirituality but allow them into public spheres. Yet, a closer examination of the brotherhood as systems of power reveals that the majority of women in Sufi brotherhoods are marginalized through the ideological constructions of divine grace or baraka, impurity, and the image of the ideal Sufi woman. Moreover, women lack knowledge that is central for being respected as a learned religious person. To overcome these structural obstacles women engage in several strategies to subvert their prescribed roles in Islam and accommodate it to their needs. In particular, Senegalese women are using secular mechanisms to challenge their place in society and gain the power denied to women in religious spheres.

Codou Bop is a journalist and consultant in Dakar, Senegal and is the Coordinator of the Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes et les Lois au Senegal.

Senegal is located in West Africa. The first contact with Islam dates back to the eleventh century. Ninety-four percent of the population are Muslims, 4% are Christians (Catholic), while 2% belong to the traditional religions. Senegal is a secular republic.

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## أدوار وموقع النساء في مجموعات الأخوة الصوفيّة في السنغال

كودو بوب

يحاول توجه جديد في بحث مجموعات الأخوة الصوفيّة إجراء تقييم لمدى تواجد ودرجة ظهور وحركة النساء المسلمات، ووفقاً لكتاب ذلك التوجّه فإن مجموعات الأخوة الصوفيّة – خلافاً لما عليه الحال في الإسلام التقليدي الأورثوذكسي – لا توفر للنساء حيزاً ذاتياً يعترن فيه عن روحانيتهن فحسب بل إن تلك المجموعات تتيج لهن كذلك المشاركة في المجالات العامة. إلا أن إجراء تفحص أدق لأنظمة الأخوة تلك كأنظمة للسلطة يكشف عن أن غالبية النساء في مجموعات الأخوة الصوفيّة يعانين من التهميش من خلال التراكيب العائدية المتمثلة بالنعمة الإلهية (البركة) وعدم الطهارة وصورة المرأة الصوفية المثالية. وبالإضافة لذلك فإن النساء تنقصهن المعرفة ذات الأهمية المركزية بالنسبة لحصولهن على الاحترام بصفتهم ممن يمتلكون المعرفة الدينية. للتغلب على هذه العوائق الهيكلية تتبّع النسوة عدة استراتيجيات لتغيير طبيعة الدور المحدد لهن في الإسلام بما يتلاءم مع احتياجاتهن وبوجه خاص فإن النساء السنغاليات يستخدمن الآليات العلمانية لتحديّ الموقع المحدد لهن ضمن المجتمع وللحصول على السلطة التي تحرّم النساء منها في المجالات الدينية.

## 妇女在塞内加尔苏菲兄弟会中的角色和地位

Codou Bop

对苏菲兄弟会的一种新的研究趋势是评价穆斯林女性的在社会中的突显情况和活跃程度。据这些研究人员所言，与正统伊斯兰社会不同，苏菲兄弟会的女性成员不但有表达自己的精神思想的自由，也可参与公众事务。但是，对苏菲兄弟会的权力体系进行更深入的研究却发现，大部分女性成员都因为所谓真主恩赐或是不洁的观念，以及苏菲女性的理想形象而被排斥在主流社会之外。此外，由于缺少学问，女性也不可能被社会尊为学识渊博的宗教人士。为克服这些体制上的障碍，妇女们采取各种策略以挑战女性在伊斯兰教之中的既定角色，满足其需求。值得一提的是，塞内加尔女性通过利用世俗体制，获得了她们在宗教领域无法运用的权力。

## Роль и место женщин в суфийских братствах Сенегала

Коду Боп

Данная работа, отражающая новую тенденцию в исследовании суфийских братств, представляет из себя попытку оценки присутствия, зрительной значимости и социальной динамичности женщин мусульманок. По представлению авторов, суфийские братства, в противоположность ортодоксальному исламу, не только предоставляют женщинам автономное пространство для выражения духовности, но и позволяют им участвовать в общественной жизни. При этом, однако, более детальное рассмотрение братств как систем организации власти, вскрывает тот факт, что большинство женщин в суфийских братствах маргинализированы посредством идеологических структур божественной милости или бараки, нечистоплотности и образа идеальной женщины-суфийки. Более того, женщины не владеют достаточными знаниями, что для образованного верующего является важнейшим условием завоевания доверия. В целях преодоления этих структурных барьеров женщины используют ряд стратегий подрыва предписываемых им исламом ролей и их приспособления для удовлетворения своих потребностей. В частности, сенегалки используют секулярные механизмы для изменения своего места в обществе и для завоевания влияния, в котором им отказано в религиозных сферах.

## **El papel y la posición de las mujeres en las hermandades sufíes de Senegal**

**Codou Bop**

Una nueva tendencia en la investigación sobre las hermandades sufíes intenta evaluar la presencia, visibilidad y dinamismo de las mujeres musulmanas. Según los autores, las hermandades sufíes, a diferencia del Islam ortodoxo, no sólo ofrecen a las mujeres un espacio autónomo para expresar su espiritualidad sino que además les permiten participar en el ámbito público. Sin embargo, un análisis más profundo de las hermandades como sistemas de poder revela que la mayoría de las mujeres en las hermandades sufíes son marginadas a través de la interpretación ideológica de la gracia divina o *baraka*, la impureza y la imagen de la mujer *sufi* ideal. Además, las mujeres carecen de los conocimientos esenciales necesarios para ser respetadas como personas con cultura religiosa. Para superar estos obstáculos estructurales, las mujeres aplican varias estrategias para cambiar sus roles determinados en el Islam y adecuarlos a sus necesidades. En particular, las mujeres senegalesas utilizan mecanismos laicos para desafiar su lugar en la sociedad y ganar el poder denegado a las mujeres en los ámbitos religiosos.

IN THE PAST MOST STUDIES dealing with women and Islam have focused on the central issues of women's status within Islam and the interpretations of Islam that place women in a subordinate position to men in the Islamic tradition. An important approach to these issues took shape in the 1980s with the emergence of feminist research within Islam and especially with the development of feminist Muslim theologies (Hassan 1989; Mernissi 1997; Mir-Hosseini 1991). These approaches, focusing on Muslim women's human rights, produced a body of research analyzing Qur'anic sources and the contexts of revelations and hadiths. Often these thinkers concluded that Islam has, in fact, given women many rights in the economic and political spheres and that when women have been denied social and political rights in Muslim societies it has been because of patriarchal interpretations of the sacred texts, not because of the texts themselves.

This feminist and human rights orientation has been positively viewed by women in the Muslim world. But it is not the only approach that has emerged among Muslim thinkers. In Sub-Saharan Africa another trend in research is coming to the fore. In the Sub-Saharan environment Muslim brotherhoods constitute important religious frameworks, and recent research has sought to assess the presence, visibility, and dynamism of Muslim women in the context of all these important brotherhoods (Coulon 1988, Reverand-Coulon 1993; Rosander 1997; Mbow 1997; Dunbar 2000). According to these researchers the Sufi brotherhoods of Sub-Saharan Africa provide women, in contrast to orthodox Islam, not only autonomous space to express their spirituality but allow women significant roles in the public sphere.

As a Muslim woman whose work focuses on Senegal I acknowledge the great value and relevance of both of these trends in research concerned with women in Islam. However, my own vision is different from each of the previously mentioned approaches. Concerning the attempts by feminist Muslim scholars to develop progressive readings of the Qu'ran in order to

improve the position of women in Muslim societies, I am convinced that even if such progressive interpretations gain credence they may not lead to a significant reversal in discourse and behaviors. So long as illiteracy and ignorance of the Islamic sacred texts are prevalent in Muslim societies, the hold of conservative ulamas on Muslims will remain very strong. Moreover, traditional cultural patriarchal norms, which also promote male superiority, continue to be widespread, and they are in accordance with and undergird conservative, rather than progressive, interpretations of Islam.

In addition, African women, and especially the Senegalese women with whom my research is most familiar, are faced with a very dire situation marked by poverty, strong gender, and class inequalities to which religion, especially when controlled by conservative forces, cannot provide adequate solutions. The legal context in Senegal, where Islam plays a central role and where local interpretations of Islam's doctrines are quite conservative, is a good illustration of this. Although Islam is not the state religion of Senegal, Shari'a law deeply influenced the Family Code, issued in 1972, with the recognition of women's inferiority within the family and of polygamy as the common law. The Code also gave men the possibility to opt for an Islamic devolution of inheritance. The result of these intertwining influences is that most Senegalese, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, believe that Islam places women in an inferior position, and, consequently, State law, shaped by Islamic teachings, codifies such assumptions of inferiority in the laws of the nation. I am, therefore, persuaded that it is secularism and women's empowerment through the defense and promotion of women's political, economic, social, and cultural human rights that will change gender and class relations within Senegal society and will do so at a faster pace.

The second trend noted above has suggested that Sufi brotherhoods provide contexts for women's advancement. In contrast to these claims I would argue that a closer examination of the brotherhoods as systems reveals that the large majority of women are actually marginalized. Although I agree with Christian Coulon that women are able to "participate in their own way in Islam, manipulating it and accommodating it to their needs" (1988: 115) I would contend that women continue to be mere disciples rather than equal religious leaders. Through the ideological construction of notions of divine grace or *baraka*, of impurity, and of the image of the ideal Sufi woman, most women remain in unequal positions of power. Moreover, woman by necessity will remain as mere disciples because the *tariqas* (brotherhoods) so far have not provided them with the knowledge of Islamic texts that is central for being respected as learned persons.

Are women aware of their marginalization? If so, why pursue a strategy of manipulation, a strategy that is finally a sign of powerlessness, rather

than challenge the situation of women openly and directly? Are Muslim women in places such as Senegal willing to subvert their prescribed roles in Islam? And if so, what are the strategies they put in place and what are the obstacles which they confront? Do they accept the *status quo* in some contexts because they fight for their rights through other frameworks such as the woman's movement, trade unions, or in more explicitly political and economic spheres?

These issues are complex ones in the context of Senegal. Senegalese women live in a secular and relatively democratic state, a state that has signed and ratified all international conventions on human rights in general and on women's rights in particular. Moreover, the women's movement, in addition to its importance in numbers, is known for its determination and strong activism. Although the population of Senegal has been in contact with Islam for centuries, Senegalese women, in fact, enjoy more freedom than do women in most Muslim societies. The questions are why such relative freedom exists in this context and why the continued disempowerment of women is also a reality and how these relate to Islam in its particular forms within Senegal.

The following sections of this article will turn to the Sufi brotherhoods and to the practices and behaviors of Senegalese women in these brotherhoods as they attempt to meet their specific religious needs and concerns. The article will also analyze the ideological constructions that prevent women's challenges to structures, beliefs, and practices that hinder their empowerment from succeeding and that contribute to maintaining women at the lowest levels of the brotherhoods. Finally, the article will examine the role of the political and legal contexts in women's acceptance of the *status quo*.

## THE SUFI BROTHERHOODS IN SENEGAL

Islam is the religion of 94% of the Senegalese population. Although the country had been in contact with Islam since the eleventh century (Levtzion and Pouwels, 2000), it was only during the nineteenth century, with the colonial conquest, that Islam became the most widespread religion. One key feature that has come to characterize Islam in Senegal is its organization into *tariqas* or brotherhoods. Such organizations have played a central religious, cultural, economic, and political role since their establishment, and they are essential to understanding how Islam functions in this Sub-Saharan nation.

There are four main *tariqas*: the Tijaniyya founded in 1902 by Al-Hajj Malick Sy, the Murridiyya founded in 1905 by Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké, and the Qadiriyya, the most ancient, thought to have been established at

the end of the nineteenth century. Finally, the smallest is the Layenne, founded also around the beginning of the twentieth century. In addition, smaller Islamist groups are active mostly in urban areas. Defining brotherhoods such as these Knut Vikor states that

[T]his is a translation of the Arabic term *tariqa*, which covers a much broader range of meaning than those normally conveyed by the English terms *order* or *brotherhood*. To simplify matters, we may distinguish between two meanings of the word. On the one hand, a *tariqa* is a method, or Way, that a Muslim may follow to reach a personal religious experience. On the other hand, *tariqa* is used for the organizational framework that may be set up to transmit and practice this method. (2000: 441)

Senegalese *tariqas* are both “ways” to reach beatitude and they are also organizations. They are called Sufi because their founders established a religious system based on mysticism and a cult of the saints. These charismatic leaders are believed by their followers to have achieved a union with God. From this union they are thought to have received the *baraka* or grace that is a product of divine power. Moreover, this divine power is assumed to be transmittable to the descendants of these spiritual leaders and to be of benefit to them.

Brotherhoods are organized in a very hierarchical manner with the *caliph* at the top of the ladder, followed by the *marabout*, who is a leader of one branch of the brotherhood who descends either from the founder or from one of his closest relatives, and finally the disciples who are at the bottom of the brotherhood structure. The *caliph* and the *marabout* initiate the disciples in the way of the *tariqa* and are supposed to serve as the intercessors between the disciples and God. The relation between the religious leader and his followers is one of devotion and strict obedience on the part of the disciple and guidance, protection, and intercession on the part of the *marabout*. Devoted and obedient disciples express their allegiance through economic means as well, working for free in fields and offering tithes (*addiya*) to the *marabout*.<sup>1</sup>

The prominence of *tariqas* in Senegalese religious, cultural, economic, and political life is so significant that the country is considered a “paradise of brotherhoods” (Cruise O’Brien 1988: 30). Such a situation

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<sup>1</sup> Disciples offer money to their *marabout* in order to free him/her from all material concerns so that he/she devotes himself/herself to his/her spiritual mission. The gifts received by the religious leader are not similar to alms given for the poor because the *addiya* is not a Qur’anic obligation. It is, however, mandatory to disciples of the brotherhoods.

derives from the history of the country and from its formation as a nation. Throughout the colonial conquests and civil wars of the nineteenth century, the population was the victim of incredible violence from both French colonialists and the armies of resistance. During this period, which resulted in the full colonization of the region, charismatic brotherhood leaders stood up for the people and led them through this painful crisis. It is from this period and role that the moral leadership of the brotherhoods dates. Later these leaders developed an attitude of collaboration with the colonial administration at the political and economic levels and became intermediaries between the French colonial administration and the people. In return, these religious leaders were given access to the development of groundnut production and trade providing them with economic power. Their wealth and influence over the broader population stem from these developments in the colonial context.

Independence came in 1960. But other West African countries showed great interest in ideologies such as nationalism or dialectical materialism, the situation was different in Senegal. Here Islam and the brotherhoods continued to thrive despite the fact that the country's first head of state, Leopold Sedar Senghor, was a Christian. The new authorities continued working hand in hand with the brotherhoods to the mutual benefit of both. Since this time, they have been closely involved with the political administrations of Senegal and serve as an interface or intermediaries between the administration and the population, particularly in the rural areas where the majority of Senegalese live.

On the political level the brotherhoods have important power, including the power to influence elections, often swaying their disciples to vote for candidates of their choosing. Especially in rural areas, government and political parties have limited access to the voting population, and therefore political leaders reach their voting audience through the leaders of the brotherhoods. In return, brotherhood leaders are rewarded with land, technical equipment, and bank loans which may or may not be repaid.

In situations of political or social crisis the *caliphs* of the brotherhoods act as mediators. For example, prior to the start of a strike the religious leaders are visited by trade unionists explaining the reasons for this action. Or again, when a law is under consideration that a corporation deems harmful to its economic interests, the corporation will seek intervention by the *caliphs*.

At the community level, where the state's administration is weaker, the influential role might be played by a local *marabout*. At the highest level, even the current head of state, Ablaye Wade, who was elected in 2000, has publicly declared that his duty is first to the *marabout* of the brotherhood in which he is a disciple. And since 2004 some *marabouts*

have decided to become even more active in the political arena, creating political parties and becoming candidates in elections.

At the economic level brotherhoods also are significant actors. As stated above, from the colonial period they have been closely associated with the production of groundnuts which are the main Senegalese export crop. Hence, they have held longstanding economic power. The brotherhoods are also very active in the economies of urban areas. Local, national, and international trade is largely controlled by disciples who can count on their *marabouts* to act as intermediaries with the Ministry of Finance or with custom authorities.

At the social level the audiences for the brotherhoods are both rural and urban. They have long been influential in rural areas where the largest, the poorest, and the less educated sections of the population live. Today they thrive in urban areas as well, recruiting even among western-educated groups. The brotherhoods have disciples in the government administration, in high schools, and even in universities which were once the preserve of Marxist-Leninists and Maoists. They own media companies and broadcast their messages through radio networks and publications. Similarly, *tariqas* are very active internationally wherever Senegalese communities are found, especially in other African nations, in Europe, and the United States.

Last but not least, from the nineteenth century to national independence, brotherhood leaders have played an important role in alleviating feelings of humiliation and oppression that flowed from colonization. However, this national pride is built on a distortion of history, as ideologists of the brotherhoods constantly present the founders of the *tariqas* as opponents of colonization and heroes of the nation and as the saviors of Islam in the face of the Catholic French colonizers. Their collaboration with colonial powers is ignored.

Although Sufi brotherhoods dominate the religious life of Senegal, other trends are also present, in particular the Wahhabia whose local name is Ibadu Rahman. First appearing in the 1980s, this movement is mostly urban. As with other movements, its interpretation of Islam is very restrictive with the objective being to implement Islam as it was in Medina during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Although its participants condemn the worship of saints, they do not display a strong anti-Sufism. In particular, the main target group is the Family Code. They profess that women should not be allowed public roles and should be submissive to men. Although appealing to some, their austere lifestyle and especially the long and dark attire that female Wahhabi women wear is not attractive to many Senegalese women who are considered among the most elegant in Africa.

## SENEGALESE WOMEN IN THE BROTHERHOODS

Women constitute 52% of the population of Senegal. Historically, except for the Troucouleur of the northern region of the country whose Islamization was very early and included the adoption of the patriarchal orientation of Islam, the main ethnic groups of Senegal (Wolof, Serers, and Lebu) were matriarchal societies in which political power and wealth were transmitted through women who, consequently, also held significant social power. In addition, women historically played an important role in the traditional religions that still have followers today.

With, on the one hand, the spread of Islam within all ethnic groups and, on the other hand, the colonialization of Senegal and its aftermath, patriarchal Arabic and European values have eroded women's social power. Today, despite differences in the positions of individual women related to age, marital status, social class, and political involvement, it can be said that Senegalese women as a group do not hold high social status. It is important, however, to understand the roles women in Senegal *do* play in Islam and in the wider society.

### Women and the Transmission of Power

Within the brotherhoods the position of women is complicated. For instance, concerning the transmission of power, brotherhoods have maintained many traditional norms and practices, some of which may not be in conformity with Islam. In Senegalese brotherhoods the *caliphate* is transmitted by men (fathers or uncles) to men (sons or brothers). But the mother's social background is an important element that influences the designation of the highest positions of the *tariqa*. No matter how wealthy or learned a candidate is, he will not be elected if his mother belongs to an inferior caste.<sup>2</sup> At this level, the choice of first wives, whose sons are likely to lead the *tariqa* in the future, is almost always chosen from the daughters and granddaughters of the saint-founder of the brotherhood. As relatives of the founder, these women are thought to share in his grace and to transmit it to their descendants. Such a practice preserves and strengthens this social order and guarantees the perennial superiority of the leading families.

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<sup>2</sup> Senegalese society is hierarchically organized in inferior and superior castes. The caste to which an individual belongs is used to determine his/her social rank and functions. Members of a caste marry among themselves (endogamy). Inferior castes traditionally perform the basic services of Senegalese society such as working with leather, metal craft, weaving, hairdressing, pottery, music, dance, and conservation of oral history. Nobles and freemen and freewomen belong to superior castes. Caste inferiority or superiority is hereditary and transmitted by fathers. Interestingly, caste and class do not necessarily match. A poor person may belong to a noble caste, whereas a wealthy person may belong to an inferior caste.

## Women as Disciples

Women also have roles as disciples in the brotherhoods. In Senegal women have long had a strong tradition of organizing groups and associations whose aims are to meet their social, family, economic, and political needs. However, in recent years there has been a noticeable trend toward establishing or joining explicitly religious associations. The reasons for this may be found in the significant role Islam has come to play in Senegalese society or perhaps the desire to comply with the dominant religious discourse and practice of the Sufi brotherhoods.

In the brotherhoods the mass of women are mere disciples. As such, they are active in religious associations known as *dahiras* that are created within the brotherhoods. A *dahira* can be all male, all female, or mixed gender, although women are most often in all female *dahiras*. The *dahiras* exist in neighborhoods, in workplaces, and in high schools and the university.

A *dahira* declares allegiance to a chosen *marabout*. Its role is to support him and to increase its own influence. This support takes first and foremost an economic form. On a fixed date members of the *dahira* collect the tithe or *addiya*, a fixed amount of money presented to the *marabout* during an annual visit which is called *ziarra*. In rural areas this economic contribution is fulfilled through voluntary and uncompensated work in the fields of the *marabout*. Several authors have emphasized the importance and centrality of women's participation in the *dahiras* and have indicated that it is increasingly through these organizations that women have expressed their spirituality and widened their spheres of influence (Sy 1969; Coulon 1988; Laborde 1995; Rosander 1997; Dunbar 2000).

Women are, in large numbers, closely involved in all religious events such as pious visits to the *marabout* (*ziarra*) and participation in religious festivals held by the brotherhoods to celebrate either the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (*Tijaniyya*) or the return of the founder from exile by the colonial powers (*Murid*) or celebrations to commemorate the call of the founder (*Layennes*). Women do volunteer work for the organizations in relation to all practical activities including cooking the food for any religious event. They collect money for their *marabout* and financially support the building of mosques in the communities where their leaders live. They perform religious visits to the shrines of the founder of their brotherhoods and organize religious chanting and religious conferences or meetings. They also engage in the promotion of their religious activities, broadcasting commercials that show the members of the *dahira* on television. Importantly, as scholars have noted, these activities and events give maximum visibility to women. Indeed, as Coulon notes

“the brotherhoods have emerged as a more typically feminine form of religious practice; Islam of the brotherhood and *marabouts* has become primarily the religion of women (1988: 117–118).

What do Senegalese women, who have traditionally been organized in same age group associations or traditional religion associations or through professional organizations, gain from membership in *dahiras*? What reasons encourage such strong commitments to these organizations within Sufi brotherhoods? One reason is that in and through these groups they are considered full believers, full participants in the brotherhoods. Second, it is here that they are allowed to manifest their spirituality publicly and to do so in ways that do not conflict with their traditions, language, and identity. Third, many women appear persuaded that the blessings from their *marabout* and from participation in the *dahiras* can help them respond to and overcome the hardships of their daily lives.

There are other, especially social, reasons explaining women's commitment to *dahiras*. They constitute autonomous spaces where women can meet, where they can give and receive support from other women. The *dahiras* are also spaces of conviviality. They facilitate the meeting and interaction of males and female single members of the *dahiras* during religious events. Moreover, marriages can be greatly facilitated by the *marabout* who may pay the brideprice of marriages associated with these events.

### Women as Spiritual Leaders

The Sufi brotherhoods and their organizations do not just offer social outlets for women nor are they merely places for women to be religious participations as disciples. They are also, sometimes, the sites in which women are spiritual leaders. The Sufi brotherhoods have, indeed, been established and controlled by men, and the status of holy persons (*wali* or friend of Allah) has always been vested in males. However, the Mourides *tariqa* offers a very interesting case of one woman, Sokhna Magat Diop, who not only was considered a *wali* but also became a high ranking leader, a *marabout*, with the power that attended that position. Although she was a woman, her father, a disciple of the founder of the brotherhood, lacked male heirs at his death. Prior to dying, he determined that she would take his charge, as *shayk*. Although she neither directed prayers as an imam nor celebrated marriages, she did teach, write, and performed *khalwa* or mystical retreats. As Coulon claims, Sokhna Magat Diop was recognized as a religious leader, delivering the Mouride *wird* (special prayers) and appointing *muqaddams* and imams. Moreover, she, like male *shayks*, was the recipient of allegiance from the disciples of the brotherhood as well as the *addiya* or tithe. Like male religious leaders, she

owned agricultural lands that were worked by her followers and was supported by several *dahiras* (Coulon 1988: 130).

The question remains how the issue of *baraka* or grace, which is so central to the ideology of the brotherhoods, was dealt with in relation to Sokhna Magat Diop who, as a woman, should have been assumed not to be a conduit of such *baraka*. In Sufi ideology ascetic practices, abstinence, meditation, and mystical retreats or *khalwas* are crucial to accessing divine grace. Through her way of life Sokhna Magat Diop behaved according to Sufi requirements. Her mysticism seems to have overcome her limitations as a female and lifted her to sainthood. Because of her true Sufi behavior her disciples have been persuaded that she was as close to God as any other *shayk* and was gifted with strong and increasing *baraka* from which they would benefit as well.

In the Qadiriyya brotherhood women have also been lifted to the position of *shayk*. But unlike Sokhna Magat Diop their religious education has not been bolstered. They have no disciples and are not allowed to receive tithes. They are, however, allowed to lead female *dahiras*, collect money for the *marabout*, organize festivals, and pursue other means of increasing the *marabout's* audience and followers.

### Women as Religious Teachers

Another area that requires exploration in relation to women and the brotherhoods concerns the delineation of teaching roles within the *tariqas*. As a group Senegalese women, whether within or outside the brotherhoods, are not highly educated or trained in Islamic knowledge. From the beginnings of the spread of Islam in West Africa, knowledge about and dissemination of Islam have been male initiatives, carried out by traders, scholars, teachers, or jihadists. Historically it has been male children who were sent to religious schools within Senegal or abroad. These males were the ones who were in contact with renowned teachers and scholars. Some were even able to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and develop their religious knowledge even further.

This pattern has persisted in the contemporary Senegalese world. It is fueled by the assumption that beyond concerns related to marriage and household duties women need only learn a few Qur'anic verses for their prayers. At an individual level, however, women do attempt to improve their religious knowledge and practice by extending their knowledge of the Qur'an and other Islamic sources through personal initiative.

Within the brotherhoods the majority of female disciples receive a very limited education. However, a few highly learned women can be found among the female relatives of the *marabouts*. Some of them manage religious schools (*daara*) where they provide girls an Islamic education.

Among these learned women the best known are Sokhna Mariama Niass and Sokhna Rokhaya Niass, both of whom belong to the Tijjania Niassene Family. They are exegetes and respected teachers who educate both men and women through a network of Muslim schools.

Another area in which female Islamic teachers can be found is in the broadcast media. In Senegal, as in most developing countries in which illiteracy is high, radio and television play significant roles in disseminating information and knowledge, including religious knowledge. Radio and television broadcast religious programming daily aimed at both Muslims and Christians. Women play a significant role in these broadcasts and often are the teachers interpreting religious texts.

### Women as Economic Actors

Women in the Sufi brotherhoods are also economic agents as well as religious disciples, teachers, and leaders. At the highest level, the *marabout's* wives have their own *dahiras* and control their own agricultural fields. They receive tithes, and disciples work their fields. On another level, the *dahiras* play important economic functions. The *dahiras* control revolving funds contributed to by members of the *dahira*. This money sometimes is available for selected members to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and/or the *omra*. Such journeys not only allow individual members to achieve a significant pillar of their faith but also allow them to purchase goods that are then sold for a profit upon return to Senegal.

Women not only contribute to these funds, but they are also a growing segment of the broader economic scene. Since the 1980s women have achieved higher levels of education and have entered the labor market in increased numbers. There is also a developing cohort of wealthy businesswomen active in international trade. Most of these women are disciples in *tariqas*. They, as a result of their increased wealth, give significant monies as their tithes to their *marabout*. In return, they expect both spiritual blessings and, more directly, protection from custom officers or reductions in their duty taxes. Here religious affiliation and economic enhancement are intertwined.

### Women as Political Actors

Prior to 2004 Senegalese religious leaders contented themselves with influencing national political life behind the scenes. Recently, however, one *marabout* has created a political party to run candidates in elections and hence to have a more direct role in the political life of the nation. Beyond the novelty of this development, in the context of this article, the important thing to note is the role the *marabout's* wife has played in the emergence of this religiously connected political party. The wife of the

*marabout* is a former director of the State-owned broadcasting network, and she has circulated in spheres of economic and political power for quite some time. It is believed that she has been a significant influence on her husband's decision to create a political party. Furthermore, she is the known author of his speeches, organizes his media campaigns, and is always a presence at political rallies and meetings. It is the *marabout's* wife who is, in fact, the most important person in this emergent political party.

## ACCEPTANCE, CHALLENGE, OR SUBVERSION?

The previous sections of this article have detailed the role of Senegalese women in the Sufi brotherhoods of this country. The following sections will explore the questions of whether and how women are empowered or disempowered in these contexts. Abdoulaye Bara Diop has described the brotherhoods as a system characterized by hierarchy, an ideology, and a mode of reproduction (1981: 263). This article will focus on the ideological components of the Sufi brotherhood and explore the ramifications for women of four significant empowering and disempowering principles: *baraka* or grace, knowledge, purity, and the image of the ideal woman.<sup>3</sup> Each will be analyzed for how it helps or hinders women's capacity to challenge the *status quo*.

### Baraka

The concept of *baraka*, which in Arabic means divine grace and/or blessing, is a central principle in Sufism. Donal Cruise O'Brien notes that "In the Sufi brotherhood, *baraka* still has the quality of grace, bearing the promise of salvation, but it also comes to be identified with worldly privilege, with wealth and power. The poor pay tribute in various forms to the bearers of grace, in hope of a charitable return as well as a passport to paradise" (1988: 4). In Senegalese brotherhoods as well *baraka* is central. It encompasses the capacity to give blessings that protect against a wide variety of misfortunes such as bad luck, accidents, or illnesses as well as the power to guide the disciple to heaven. It is believed that *baraka* is transmitted from the saint, the founder of the brotherhood, to his descendants. Therefore, even if a *marabout* possesses none of the qualities needed to obtain *baraka*, he is nonetheless gifted with it through his spiritual heritage. In this instance it is relevant to consider *baraka* as an ideological construction that legitimates the maintenance and permanence

<sup>3</sup> The meaning given here to empowerment is political as it refers to structures of power, to access power, and to power relations between groups and individuals.

of a group of persons at the head of the system and the exclusion of others who, by their spiritual qualities, might claim to possess such grace. *Baraka*, a notion of spiritual grace, thus functions centrally in a system of power to ensure inclusion and exclusion.

As Cruise O'Brien noted, *baraka* has come to be "identified with wealth and power." The purveyors of *baraka* have, indeed, come to hold both wealth and power through income gained through tithing, the profits accumulated from the voluntary and uncompensated work their disciples perform on the large farms, and the social and political power that has accrued from their positions. The disciples believe that all action performed for their *marabout* has a religious outcome that will earn them merit; therefore the more *baraka* a *marabout* is invested with the more powerful his blessings are considered. In turn, the *marabout* gains more disciples and subsequently becomes richer and more powerful. As descendants from the founder of the brotherhood, women are in principle supposed to inherit *baraka* from their charismatic forebear. Yet *baraka* is, in practice, believed to be primarily a male attribute transmitted by men to men. Women, as mothers, spouses, or daughters of the founders, are also assumed to be vested with *baraka*, but theirs is asserted to be of a weaker type. Moreover, the flourishing of *baraka* assumes a strong personality, wealth, and knowledge, all things most women lack. Hence, the principle of *baraka* sometimes aids women but also fundamentally contributes to their ongoing marginalization.

### Knowledge

In Senegalese Sufi brotherhoods, knowledge of sacred texts (the Qur'an, the hadiths, and tafsir) and of religious sciences, command of Arabic, outreach, and teaching have all been significant practices of the founders of the brotherhoods and their successors. Such knowledge and training are central to being acknowledged as learned and trustworthy. Within such a system the level of religious knowledge and aptitude defines the position of both groups and individuals. Imams, judges, and teachers are all recruited from the groups who have mastered these tools and resources.

Knowledge is not just a tool of the already powerful. In the case of Muslim societies, it has empowered Muslim women to understand the discrimination they face and the social position to which they have been traditionally confined. It has enabled them to challenge biased interpretations of sacred texts and, within the brotherhoods, to confront the ideology that renders them marginalized.

Despite this potential for empowerment few women master the holy texts; average Senegalese women hardly know the Qur'an much less the hadiths and tafsir. Authors such as Rosander (1997) and Mbow (1997)

have highlighted the low level of Senegalese women's Islamic knowledge both within and outside the brotherhoods. As noted above, the bulk of women in brotherhoods are mere disciples who have not even been initiated into the special rites of the brotherhoods. According to both Mbow (1997) and Rosander (1997) women are not allowed to pay allegiance as individuals to a *marabout*; they must do so through the mediation of their father or husband. Yet initiation and the mastering of brotherhood rites are mandatory to climbing the ladder to middle and high level positions in brotherhoods. Women are, thus, caught forever in a bind, likely, because of their femaleness, to remain forever mere disciples.

### Purity and Rituals

Another factor that limits the gaining by women of religious knowledge and the development of their aptitudes and thereby their ability to secure positions that would help them understand and challenge the system relates to biology. This is especially the case in relation to women's assumed impurity. To perform religious practices such as prayers, *dhikr* recitation, pilgrimage, reading of the Qur'an, and the entering of sacred spaces such as mosques, a Muslim must be clean (*tahara*). As in all religions of the "Book," women are believed in Islam to be unclean at certain periods of their life such as during menses and bleeding after childbirth. Hence, women cannot, during significant periods of time, perform their religious duties. Once more, a religious principle, purity, blocks women's access to knowledge and positions, denying them the possibility to ascend to places of greater leadership in the brotherhoods.

### The Image of the Ideal Woman

The role of ideology is, in significant part, to legitimize a system, be that system a culture, religion, or nation-state. In this case the function of ideology within the Sufi brotherhoods of Senegal is to maintain women as their zealous supporters but as supporters who do not challenge the brotherhoods and their excluding structures of power but, indeed, love them. One important element of the ideological construction of the brotherhoods is the role played by the female relatives of the founders, in particular their mothers. The Murid are those who have magnified the mother to an extreme position. A good example of this can be found in the image and cult of Mame Diarra Bousso, mother of Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of the *tariqa*. She is portrayed as having been gifted with extraordinary qualities such as patience, perseverance, commitment, loyalty, a spirit of sacrifice, modesty, and the acceptance of seclusion. Indeed, according to the Murid, it is because of her outstanding virtues that God chose her to bear a child who would found the *tariqa*. Mothers

and daughters of the *tariqa*'s founder are presented as the ideal women and ideal wives. All female disciples are exhorted to follow them and identify with them (Rosander 1997: 167). Many legends and oral traditions have been forged to present these ideal women as almost supernatural (Mbow 1997). Hence, the behaviors and attitudes that support the structures of the *tariqas* are idealized and presented as normative for all women, and alternative interpretations of women and of religious life and organization are severely undermined.

## UNCHALLENGED DOGMAS AND STRUCTURES

The four principles analyzed in the previous sections may seem contradictory to those ideas and developments explored above through which women have sought empowerment and increased power within the brotherhoods. In fact these are not sheer contradictions. As was demonstrated in the opening sections of this article, women have challenged social, political, and religious orders, but they have done so out of and within the framework of their religion and especially of the *tariqas*. They have both accepted the ideology that has legitimated their subordinate positions and have used elements within that system such as the Qur'an, the hadiths, Sufism, and the brotherhoods to extend and transform those positions.

It is not only that women are forced to work within these constraints. Women also find legitimization in these situations and in organizations such as the *dahiras*. Joining such associations and participating in their social, political, and religious practices allow women to present themselves as devout Muslims and devout disciples. It allows women to affirm their Muslim identity and simultaneously be actors (even if minor ones) in the society's religious life. Finally, such participation also confirms their support not only of local *marabouts* and their brotherhoods but permits women to be seen as promoters of Islam more generally, adding another layer of legitimization.

Thus a closer look at women's behavior reveals how women have been able to take advantage of this system to be present in the public sphere and to strengthen their economic role. Through their financial support of *marabouts* they strengthen both their religious leaders and improve their own financial and political situation. As Coulon observes, "the considerable incomes of some of the women, especially those in commerce, represent an important source of finance for the brotherhood chiefs. A Senegalese shayk's charisma depends not only on his personal qualities and scholarship, but also on his financial means. The women's *dahira* have thus become important influences on the religious market of the *marabout*" (1988: 124). Coulon goes on to state "moreover, the tradition of female associations and female independence makes black African women desir-

able partners in any institution (be it religious or not) which aims at mobilizing people and wealth. The *marabouts* of Senegal show their awareness of this when they encourage female *dahiras*, allow women to be independent talibes (disciples) and authorize a woman *khalife*" (1988: 133).

On the political level a similar interconnection between women's quest for greater power and the standing religious and political order is also demonstrated. As authors such as Dunbar have noted, *dahiras* do not just offer financial support but also political backing to candidates with whom they identify (Dunbar 2000: 408). It is through this exchange of influence that women have been able to utilize the *status quo* to enhance their positions in society.

Despite this creative working of the system on the part of women, questions remain. Can women do more than subvert and exploit, consciously or not, the system of exchange of blessings and *baraka* from the *marabout* for money and presents from the disciples? At this point and within the religious framework such creative manipulation appears to be all that women can accomplish. Most women appear to be unable or unwilling to challenge seriously this extraordinarily powerful system as a religious system. The reasons for such inability are complex and multiple. They range from the fact that although the *tariqas* are mentioned in no Islamic sacred texts, these associations are considered by Senegalese to be a central part of Islam. Moreover, the emergence and development of the *tariqas* have been deeply connected with the colonial experience and have been identified with "Black Islam" (Triaud 2000). Depending upon one's perspective, such identification entails a problematic form of fetishistic Islam or, more commonly, the only revealed religion that allowed Africans to survive colonialism and adapt their religion and culture to difficult circumstances. For many, this latter interpretation of the brotherhoods as a source of identity in times of crisis continues to support the ongoing power of the brotherhoods and contributes to the lack of motivation or resources really to challenge them. In good part, this history is why, at this point, except for fundamentalism, challenges to religion or to the *tariqas* in Senegal are not really on anyone's, let alone women's, agenda.

## WOMEN AND THE SECULAR STATE

If the religious worlds of the *tariqas* provide a site for creative manipulation but not fundamental change, are there other means by which Senegalese women seek their rights and struggle for increased opportunity and power? One major venue in which Senegalese women are pursuing the extension of their rights is through the secular state and its various apparatuses. Although the secular realm in Senegal is still, like much of the rest of the

world, patriarchal, nonetheless the political, legal, and social context of Senegal is quite open to contestation and challenges on the part of women. It is because of the religious history of Senegal and the current potential of the secular state that Muslim women focus here for expansion of the rights. Indeed, as Dunbar notes, "Feminist groups, though composed of Muslim women, focus their objectives and strategies outside of and at times in opposition to the religious associations" (2000: 408).

Senegalese women obtained the right to vote and to be candidates for elected office in 1956. In practice, women exercise these rights. Many women have been appointed ministers, and a Prime Minister of Senegal has been a woman. Although still few in numbers, women sit in the National Assembly and many other minor decision-making bodies. They are members of political parties and are closely involved in the civil society through their associations and groups. In recent years, because of increased female education, entry into the labor market, urbanization trends, and successful struggles by the women's movement, women's autonomy from the constraints of family and social control has also increased.

Yet on all these levels it is as citizens and/or activists that women have extended their rights, influence, and power. It is not as Muslims that these have been accomplished. In the secular realm women have sought to promote their individual political, economic, and social agendas. And when these agendas have been threatened or jeopardized on religious grounds, women have indeed fought back. But they have done so on secular grounds and by utilizing secular arguments and frameworks. Thus, by not directly confronting religious authorities and by pursuing their rights through secular means, women in Senegal have often been able to gain the support of the broader society, including the support of religious brotherhoods who would exclude them from positions of influence and power within their own religious contexts.

## CONCLUSION

Thus as we review the condition of Muslim women in Senegal we find a complex situation. On the one hand, through religious *dahiras*, Senegalese Sufi brotherhoods provide women with a space to express their spirituality in the public sphere contrary to the recommendations of orthodox Islam. Women have been able to utilize these spaces to meet their specifically religious needs and concerns and to nurture the public role of women in religion. This all gives evidence to Senegalese women's wisdom, ingenuity and adaptability within the constraints and possibilities of their religious traditions. However, as this analysis has also demonstrated, there are severe limits to this approach; religion in the form currently

found in Senegal, whether within or outside the brotherhoods, is unable to respond fully to the inequalities that ground the discrimination of women face and that result in poverty and marginalization from resources that would transform this situation. Women, despite their creativity and ingenuity, continue to be significantly excluded from decision-making spheres within religion and therefore lack the means truly to address their situation. It is, thus, finally the contention of this article that it is through secularism and within secular, autonomous movements and in alliance with gender sensitive segments of society that Senegalese women will best be able to consolidate and expand changes in both the domestic and public spheres. It is here, and not through the mechanisms of religion, that women will be most able to transform the unequal power relations that continue to do them such great harm.

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