

The Sufi fraternities: from profound Islamisation to Islam's adaptation

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Beyond the conquests, a profound Islamisation has taken place, anchoring this monotheistic religion, originating in the Arabian Peninsula, into other societies, where it gradually replaced traditional religions. The origin of the specificities that make up the substratum of a 'black' Islam - that is, the expression of the Prophet's religion proper to African blacks – must be sought in this foundational fact.

The fraternities played a determining role in this Islamisation, taking advantage of the terrain marked – sometimes in spite of itself – by French colonialism. By rejecting a colonial domination, in its cultural dimension, the Senegalese have sometimes resorted to the adoption of an Islamic dogma in that it was at the same time a self-alienation opposable to the will of assimilation of the indigenous that was at the heart of the colonial project. In this paradoxical fact, one of the explanations of the specificities of the Islam in Senegal can be found.

Thanks to their peaceful nature, the fraternities, entering Senegal through trade and travellers, played a leading role in the Islamisation of the country. It also became clear that the Sufi fraternities were better adapted to the modes of functioning proper to African societies.

Two fraternities entered Senegal very early on, through the routes of trans-Saharan trade and pilgrimage to Mecca. On the one hand, the Qadiriyya, originating from Iraq arriving through the trans-Saharan space. On the other, the Tijaniyya, originally from Algeria, but whose founder fled to Fez in Morocco, where he was protected by Moulay Suleiman. This Sufi courant, that existed for a long time and was widely spread by the 'marabouts of the savannah', left its traces and shaped the Islam vision in Senegal forever. Better still, the fraternity system, embracing the contours of local society, prospered, and eventually yet smoothly, replaced many of that society's traditional values. Membership and identification with the social group is an anthropological feature of African societies. The fraternity system, with its modes of allegiance and solidarity within the community, so much served as a model that two other fraternities – local, endogenous ones this time – came into being: the Mouride brotherhood¹ and the 'ilâhiyyîn'² Layene brotherhood. The latter, apart from being specific in local terms, also included ethnic obedience, thus bringing together the faithful that belong to the Lebu, an ethnic group of fishermen from the Dakar region, who claim their leader Mahdi is the reincarnation of Muhammad.

The fraternities and marabouts owe their success to the role they played in filling the socio-political void that resulted from the destruction of the old social and political entities by French colonialism. This role gives them a popular dimension and their leaders are recognised as apostles of Islam or even national heroes. Today, nearly 95% of Senegalese Muslims belong

1 Mouride or Muridiyya: this fraternity is founded by sheikh Ahmadou Bamba. Today, it is one of the country's most popular fraternities, thanks to its large diaspora in Europe and the USA, assuring the brotherhood a real financial independence.

2 The 'People of God' in Arab.

to fraternities, all of whom share the Sufi message, to which one needs to add a dose of sociological adaptation.

Perhaps it is necessary to recall that this in-depth Islamisation coincides, strangely, with the French colonial intrusion in Senegal. A complex phenomenon has developed. It deserves a deep analysis, because it becomes difficult to understand the popular, sometimes even political, dimension of this Islam by omitting it, or by confusing it with other subsequent manifestations that are only its external manifestations.

In fact, contrary to Western theses, precolonial Africa was not a *tabula rasa*. Senegal was endowed with several political entities, in the form of kingdoms headed by rulers from dynasties. The kingdom of Cayor was led by kings bearing the title 'damel', the most famous of them still being Lat Jor Ngone Latir Jop. After having fiercely resisted general Faidherbe, the former is killed and his troops are defeated by the French army on October 26, 1886, in Dekheule, Senegal. His kingdom's fate is that of all others who will, one by one, fall under French control – given France's military superiority and the intensity of its conquest.

In those days, the colonial administration imposed an administrative system with which its 'subjects' could not identify. This resulted in a feeling of general malaise and loss of bearings, due to a real socio-political void. The unbridled destruction of old local political structures and the defeat of traditional leaders produced a situation in which the absence of points of reference facilitated any kind of preaching, as long as it stood out from the 'new white masters'. It is at this moment that most sheikhs began to emerge.³ The messianic expectation was fulfilled!

The message of these Sufi sheikhs easily found a positive echo, especially since a new economic order came into place: the development of the peanut culture, arriving from the Americas. The fraternities played a major role in this culture, introduced by the colonial administration to meet the demands of large French oil mills. Given the harsh administration in the cities, the marabouts and their followers retired to the countryside, which explains their famous name 'marabouts of the bush'. They attracted their disciples to these new 'convents', which had become refuges of the neophytes of a local Islam. There, they found a certain security and – above all – a social model reconstituted around solidarity through the fraternity's relationships.

These first fraternity circles, especially among the Sufi order of the Mourides, formed the structure of the new colonial, essentially peanut-based economy. The French authorities were concerned about the impact of this culture on the home economy and so they treated these 'peanut marabouts' with a certain respect. Thus – as we have seen in the Maghreb – political power, by pure economic constraint, strengthened religious power. These marabouts became the real actors of an in-depth Islamisation, beyond the political or literate elites, and had an influence on all strata of the Senegalese population.

This popularisation of Islam is neither attributable to Arab, nor to Arab-Berber armies (that have never penetrated the interior country) and even less to war expeditions that were led from the North of the Sahara. In Senegal, Islam had, and still has, this specificity. Relations

³ Title given to the marabouts. From the Arabic 'šayk', 'old man', 'sheikh'.

between religious and political leaders have never changed: they fluctuate between benevolence and sporadic tensions. In the same way that the French colonists relied on the influence of the marabouts to stabilise the colony and efficiently raise taxes, the country's successive presidents made the fraternity leaders into privileged intermediaries between themselves and the governed: General de Gaulle even solicited support from the Sufi marabouts for the 1958 referendum on independence. But despite cyclical confrontations between political authorities and religious leaders, in Senegal, Islam remains a factor of social stabilisation and even national cohesion, although the state is 'officially' secular, whilst giving full voice to other faiths, including Christianity (featuring a Catholic majority).

At a time when the Malian crisis has affected the evolution of the religious sphere in West Africa, many question the viability and sustainability of such an Islam in the middle of the Sahel turmoil. Wahhabi Salafism is already present for a long time and the struggle of influence between its currents and the Sufi fraternities is a reality. All this against the backdrop of rivalries between religious models, featuring various actors such as Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran.