

The Baraka Tijani: The Structure and Pattern of a Transnational Religious Circuit

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I spent this past summer travelling along a transnational religious circuit that has developed over the past two decades, running from Mbour in Senegal to the Parisian suburb of Mantes-la-Jolie, by way of Fes, Morocco. The France-based architects of these religious circuits are followers of the Medina Gounass branch of the Tijani Muslim religious order. Because it is where the founder of the Tijaniyya Sufi Order, Sidi Ahmed Tijani, is buried, the city of Fes has emerged as the focal point for this transnational religious circuit. There is certainly nothing particularly new about the regular flow of Tijani pilgrims from West Africa to Fes. Tijani religious circuits between Morocco and Senegal date back to the end of the 19th century and Senegalese pilgrims to Mecca would often stop in Fes for special *Ziarra* (paying visit to saints, dead or alive) on their way back to Senegal. Tijani family members also travelled to Senegal regularly to pay visits to important Tijani religious authorities, as well as predominantly Tijani cities and villages. What is new, however, is the role of the Tijani diaspora in the expansion of these transnational circuits to their European host countries through the celebration of transnational events that require participants to travel across national borders. My research has focused on two such events.

The first of these is the annual *Ziarra* for which the Baro Family, one of the leading spiritual lineages in Senegal, brought to Fes a delegation of 75 members lead by Cheikh Baro, the Khalif of the Baro family in Mbour, and 30 of the family's followers from France, Italy and Spain. During the past two decades, each year has witnessed an increase in the number of participants in this transnational event. The second transnational event is the *Daha*, a spiritual gathering of Tijani followers from around Europe held annually in Mantes-la-Jolie, France. A five-day retreat marked by prayers, blessings, and fundraising for religious causes and projects, this event is a duplication of the annual *Daha*



that is held in Medina Gounass, Senegal. There, the Medina Gounass branch of the Tijaniyya conduct a two-week spiritual retreat outside the city, in a cleared forest where only men are present. The event held in Mantes-la-Jolie is designed to give to followers who are far away from home a chance to share in the celebration of the *Daha*.

The transnational circuit is completed annually by the return to Mbour of the Senegalese religious leaders, along with Cheikh Baro and his delegation. This year, Cheikh Baro's return in mid-July coincided with the start of the Holy Month of Ramadan (early August). For the occasion, the Cheikh was welcomed at the airport in Dakar by his followers and others who travelled from Mbour to the capital. This annual return, after almost two months of transnational travel, always carries with it an air of triumph. Participa-

tion in the transnational circuit increases the charisma and authority of religious leaders in the eyes of their followers, most of whom have never been out of the country, and who read the annual travels and crossings of national borders as an expansion of their Sufi order to faraway and non-Muslim places.

I have gathered what I believe is a very rich and interesting body of qualitative data, based on which I expect to write two separate articles. My long-term objective is to write a book on this very important subject, contributing to a better understanding of transnational religious practices and their impact on the formation and transmission of religious identities across national borders.

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