

North Africa

ABDEL WEDOUD OULD CHEIKH

The expansion of Islam in northwest Africa has been very much associated with the spread of brotherhood movements (*туруq*). Religious and educational practices as well as collective rules of conduct carry the imprints of these movements, the political and economic influence of which has been – and remains – decisive in vast regions from Mauritania to Nigeria, from the Sudan to Senegal. Recent developments, however, indicate an increase in power of a neo-fundamentalist inspirational Islam originating in the Middle East, which presents itself as a rival to the ideas and practices developed by the local versions of *tasawwuf* (Muslim mysticism) organized as brotherhoods.

The following proposes to underline more particularly the 'gender' dimension of local Muslim practices as it manifests itself both in 'tradition' and in certain recent challenges to it. The focus is limited to the Moorish society of Mauritania, although it is most likely that the transformations experienced by this society have affected its neighbouring societies in an analogous way.

Although it is not necessary to offer a general presentation of Muslim brotherhoods or the *tasawwuf* as such,¹ it should be noted that the brotherhoods are religious organizations centred on the person of the *shaykh*: a master and educator *par excellence* (*murabbi*) whose authority is part of a chain (*silsila*) of authorities leading back to the Prophet of Islam. He is perceived by his disciples (*talāmīdh*, *murīdūn*) as a guide, an intercessor who must be served and obeyed without reserve until he leads them, his disciples, through the chosen trials to the point of mastering 'the way' (*tariqa*). They can then, after a rite of enthronement, leave the 'guide' as they now hold their own title of 'master' (*shaykh*) or 'licensed' (*muqaddam*) and are authorized to guide others. In practice, the transmission of material and symbolic capital (*baraka*) associated with the direction of the *tariqa* is generally carried out by the descendants of the founding *shaykh*, but not without competition and dissent amongst the various candidates of the inheritance.

In the Moorish territory, which has often constituted a place of transit and transmission of Maghrebi or Middle Eastern brotherhood organizations heading for Sub-Saharan Africa, the principal *туруq* comprise the following: the *shādhiliyya* in its *nāsiriyya* variant, inaugurated by the Moroccan Muhammad b. Nāsīr al-Dīrī at the end of the 17th century; the *qādiriyya*, associated principally with the legacy of Al-Shaykh Sid al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811), the movement's great Saharan renewer of the 18th century; and finally the *tijāniyya*, the dissemination of

Brotherhoods and Gender Relations in Mauritania

which in the Moorish territory and its confines is accredited especially to Al-Shaykh Muḥamd al-Hāfīz al-ʿAlawī (d.1830/ 31). An entangled network of ramifications emerged from these main brotherhoods, associating individual initiatives, inheritance quarrels, tribal *ʿasabiyya* (group solidarity), and even political allegiances. The search for autonomy manifests itself most notably in the creation of centres that often become places of instruction, agricultural production, and commercial exchange.

Formally, the *туруq* appear as miniature reproductions or 'clones' of their mother religion: they reduplicate the initial messenger (the Prophet Muhammad) with a second messenger who 'descends' from him – either doctrinally, by the *silsila*, or 'biologically', by the sharifi *nasab*, to whom a number of brotherhood founders/transmitters are linked – and often 'repeats' the key traits of his biography. This is essentially a male affair: the founders and their 'chains', the *muqaddamin*, and the successors counting no women amongst them.

Nonetheless, women are not absent from the brotherhood movements. Islam extracted from the common basis of the two pre-existing monotheisms the theme of the female temptress and it tends to regulate with a certain rigour the contacts and relations between men and women. In addition, Islam is profoundly suspicious of celibacy. Albeit in vain, the mystical propaedeutic exalts the refusal of all pleasures of the flesh; rarely has it arrived at a definitive separation of men and women. Inversely, certain brotherhood movements in the Saharan region arouse rumours and concern over the promiscuity these movements supposedly authorize, meaning the male-female contacts.

Extreme variations on the gender issue

Two communities, belonging increasingly to the same tribe (Idaybusāt) and cohabiting in the same space (within the confines of Tagant and Assaba), serve to illustrate contrasting positions. On the one hand is the branch known as the *ghuzfiyya* of the *shādhiliyya*, founded by Al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf al-Dāwūdī (d. 1801), to which diverse accounts, notably colonial,² attribute orgiastic practices leading at times to births out of wedlock, these children being baptized *awlād al-nūr* (sons of the light). On the other hand is a scion branch of the *qādiriyya* initiated at the end of the 1930s by Al-Shaykh Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh wuld Adda (d. 1963), who went as far as to initiate celibacy amongst his adherents, thus engendering a small community of monk farmers at a place called Būmdayd, in central Mauritania.

Another group, this one originating from the Ibrahimian *tijāniyya* of Kaolack (Senegal) made itself known in the 1950s by a co-gendered existence considered suspect by the *vox populi* of the region in which it emerged: its adherents were conferred the sobriquet *ahl al-gazra*, i.e. 'the unsubdued', 'marginals'. The group recently recalled the originality proclaimed by certain brotherhood movements in treating the question of gen-

der relations in Moorish space. The context of the polemic that this incited should be briefly reiterated here: a polemic that illustrates in particular the opposition evoked earlier in this article between the local Islam of the brotherhoods and the new global Islam of neo-fundamentalist influence.

In order to correctly perceive the stakes of the controversy incited by the position taken by the movement's *shaykh*, Wuld Sidīna, it is appropriate to underline the fact that in Moorish society, all physical contact, and notably the salutatory handshake, is traditionally prohibited between people of the opposite sex unless they belong to the class of those who may have physical contact between sexes (*mahārim*) – a class defined by blood or milk kinship, and within which marriage is prohibited. Wuld Sidīna was to publicly rise up against this tradition that organized the separation of men from women by designating amongst them who could touch one another and who could not.

He takes the pretext of an interview for the unofficial journal *al-Shaʿb* on 21 November 1989 of two Sudanese academicians visiting Mauritania, under the title: 'The Sudanese woman is at parity with man as much in rights as in duties. A Sudanese scholar offers his opinions on the issues of speaking to a woman or shaking her hand.' In substance, one amongst them declared that there is no harm in a man and a woman shaking hands *ajānib*, that is to say non-*mahārim*, as a salutation. Basing himself on this declaration, Wuld Sidīna pronounced a *jawāb*, disseminated in the form of a tract, in which he declared that it is licit for a man and a woman, no matter who they are, to shake hands. He thus publicly opposed traditional rules of male-female contact in Moorish society, founded on kinship relations.

This position taken by the *tijāni shaykh*, whose community already had a reputation of non-conformism with respect to male-female relations, incited a unanimous condemnation by the Mauritanian religious establishment. This position has also recently fed the stigmatizing discourse of certain former members of Wuld Sidīna's community criticizing it adamantly for, amongst other things, the promiscuity (in their eyes scandalous) instituted among men and women.

Wuld Sidīna and his disciples did not remain without reaction in the face of these attacks. They themselves engaged a vigorous polemic, specifically against their former companions that had renounced them and that they accused of being in the pay of Wahhabism.³

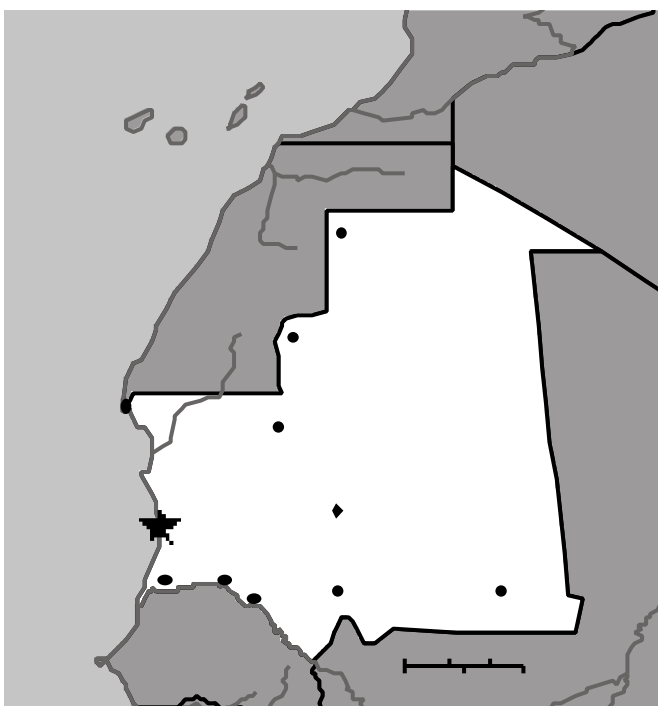
What can be concluded from the above-mentioned observations in terms of the evolution of gender relations amidst the brotherhood movements and in a larger sense within Moorish society in its entirety? Even if the communities mentioned are demographically small, it is appropriate to underline the diversity and the non-conformity to a certain representation of Sunni 'orthodoxy' that they bring into the gender relations in Moorish society. The recent upheavals experienced by this society (massive sedentarization of former nomads, un-

precedented swelling of the urban population, substantial progress of elementary religious education, etc.) tend to modify the very foundations of the rules of life in collectivity on which it is based. In the context of the nomads, the residential unities (encampments), generally small in size, were constituted, above all, based on tribal kinship. The tent was not very conducive to keeping women inside. In fact their presence in the public sphere, although it has a certain sense in this type of context, did not pose a particular problem. The statutory parity and the genealogy offered the safeguard necessary to govern the contacts between individuals and between the two sexes. With the exception of the marginal cases previously mentioned, the brotherhood movements' management of community affairs was part and parcel of a tradition marked by monogamy and by a certain women's 'liberty' that belonged to the practices and collective representations of Moorish society. The social upheavals mentioned here planted the seeds of new recompositions. The rural communitarism that served as the substance for the forming of brotherhoods gave way to anomy, or at least the threat of anomy, in the new cities. The *baraka* of the *shaykh* was progressively effaced before the individual adhesion to a 'reinvented' Islam – that of neo-fundamentalism. And the grand villas of the new pious bourgeoisie offer from then on the possibility to separate the female space from public space and from masculine space. It is to be feared that in this precise context, the formula of Max Weber, according to which 'the city liberates', is not to be verified.

Notes

1. For a historical overview, see: Jenkins, R. G. (1979), 'The evolution of Religious Brotherhoods in North and Northwest Africa 1523-1900', in Willis, J. R. (ed.), *The Cultivators of Islam*, London: Frank Cass. For the Mauritania-Senegalese territory, see Robinson, D. (2000), *Paths of Accommodation*, Athens: Ohio University Press; Robinson, D. and Triaud, J.-L. (eds.) (2000), *La tijāniyya*, Paris: Karthala; Ould Cheikh, A. W. (2001), 'La généalogie et les capitaux flottants. Al-Shaykh Sid al-Mukhtār (m. 1811) et les Kunta', in Bonte, P. et al. (eds.), *Emirs et Présidents*, Paris: CNRS.
2. See especially Beyriès, J. (1935), 'Note sur les Ghoudf', in *Rev. Et. Isl.*, I, and Du Puigadeau, O. (1993), *Tagant*, Paris: Phébus.
3. An entire file has been made with tracts signed by members of the community where this position is expressed openly and without nuance.

Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, Ph.D. in sociology and anthropology (University of Paris V and EHESS), is professor of sociology at the University of Nouakchott and is former director of the Mauritanian Institute of Scientific Research. Specialist in Saharan Islam and brotherhoods of northwest Africa, he is currently working on Arab manuscripts of the *qādiriyya Kunta*.
E-mail: awoc@toptechology.mr
yctc@club-internet.fr



SOURCE: CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, 2000.