

West Africa

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Medina Gounass: the End of a Religious Isolate

Medina Gounass is an isolated religious community situated in a remote area of Senegal. Until the 1980s, the leader of this branch of the Tijan *tariqa* refused all contact with the state authorities. The imperatives of *shari'a* were rigorously applied in nearly all aspects of social and religious life. But after the death of the founder of the community, things changed dramatically. Disputes between the heirs of the founder's legacy, struggles over agricultural resources, and fierce competition between supporters of political parties, made the intervention of the worldly authorities inevitable. Today, the community of Medina Gounass is, like so many Sufi orders in Senegal, courted by the state elite.



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Ahmed Tijan Be, current caliph of Medina Gounass

Located some 85 km south of the regional capital Tambacounda in eastern Senegal, Medina Gounass is one of the largest communities of the Haute Casamance region. Its inhabitants, mainly of Hal Pular (Toucouleur) and Peul origin, live in the many quarters of the community. A modern road system, constructed at the beginning of the 1980s, just after the ascension of the first caliph, is centred around the huge mosque. Its impressive minaret can hardly be missed upon entering the village by one of the dusty bush roads.

Ahmed Tijan Ba, usually referred to as *thierno*, is the current caliph of the community. He is the spiritual guide of the numerous followers living in Medina Gounass as well as abroad. His leadership extends to nearly all domains of everyday life in the community. He is both the politico-religious leader and judge. People choose to live in the community because they feel that his 'closeness to God' (*walaya*) is beneficial. Others, living elsewhere in Senegal or abroad, pay visits from time to time to Medina Gounass. Nowadays, the adepts have photographs, sold in the local shops, through which they experience the veneration of the *thierno*.

While walking the streets of Medina Gounass, one notices immediately the absence of women. It is stated that women should stay at home and rarely go out. If they do, they should be veiled – even within the confines of the compound. Women often gather to listen to the words of Thier-

no Amadou Seydou Ba, the community's founder who died in 1980, recorded on tape.

The foundation of the community

Thierno Amadou Seydou Ba founded Medina Gounass in 1935. He was a Hal Pular originally from the Fouta Tooro, a region located in the middle valley of the Senegal River. After several years of travel and study, mainly in the southern Casamance region, he finally settled in Medina Gounass with a handful of disciples. He preached the Tijan *wird*, a litany of prayers brought to Senegal from Morocco in the 19th century by the Hal Pular militant El Hadji Omar Tall.

At the outset, Medina Gounass was not more than a simple residential centre for followers, connected to the private home of the *thierno*. But it began to develop rapidly when large crowds of followers, mostly fleeing the harsh manifestations of colonialism or the dictatorial regimes in some parts of the subregion (e.g. Sekou Toure's Guinee-Conakry), settled in the community. While the circle of disciples expanded, the *thierno* demonstrated an extraordinary *baraka*. And this to the extent that he was able to transform a small group of adepts into a self-conscious religious community, with an elaborated structure and a firm religious base in the *shari'a*.

Under the guidance of the *thierno*, Medina Gounass soon became a religious isolate. Contacts with the French colonial state and then, after 1960, the independent state of Senegal, were limited to the paying of taxes and the commercialization of cash crops. In one of the few published articles on this religious community, the *thierno* stressed his fight against innovations (*bid'a*) and took a firm line on the implementation of *shari'a*.¹ Unlike other rural communities, where the state introduced its officials and the agricultural cooperatives, Medina Gounass became a new 'Pakistan', land of the pure, from which all *bida* were excluded.

Thierno Amadou Seydou Ba's stress on asceticism and isolation was to some extent a response to the luxury and corruption that went with the implementation of the bureaucratic state, but was also a perhaps unintended response to other Senegalese Sufi orders, and the well-known *marabout-homme d'affaires* in particular, who lived in luxury and closely cooperated with the worldly powers. Even during its annual *dakaa*, the nine-day spiritual retreat in the nearby forest, none of the state authorities were invited. Some fervent militants even engaged in violent protest against the icons of modernity; the *thierno's* adepts were accused of having set fire to the Simenti tourist hotel in the Niokolokoba national park.

Outside interference

After the death of the community's founder, internal quarrels began to undermine the unity of this 'mini-republic'. The appointment of Ahmed Tijan Ba, the founder's son, as caliph was heatedly debated. The Peul section of the community claimed the leadership saying that they were the first to have settled in Medina Gounass. In

1977, party-politics entered the community. The Peul section voted massively for the opposition's Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS), while the *thierno*, by then seriously ill and hardly capable of leading his followers, supported the ruling Parti Socialiste (PS). Already in 1975, he had banned commercial cotton cultivation, which was the main source of income for the Peul population. The leader told his followers that cotton cultivation would lead to a serious reduction in women's fertility.² But other more worldly motives played a role as well.

Like most Sufi orders in Senegal, the community leaders controlled peanut cultivation, which was an important source of income. Cotton cultivation, however, bypassed local agencies of control. Contracts were signed with individual farmers, personally responsible for fulfilling the conditions rigorously specified by the state-owned cotton company SODEFITEX. Farmers were now paid in cash, instead of the *bon d'achat*, used in the case of peanut cultivation, which could easily be gathered by the community's leader. The effect on the community's cohesion was devastating: fights broke out and several casualties were reported. The Peul left Medina Gounass on a massive scale to settle in nearby villages. For the first time in the history of the community, police forces intervened in their internal affairs.³

These events, of course, changed the position of the community *vis-à-vis* the national state. Today many state officials court Medina Gounass. During the latest *dakaa* celebration, regional as well as national state representatives made their way to Medina Gounass. President Abdou Diouf sent a delegation to 'greet and encourage' the *thierno* and to wish him and the attendants success and 'a perfect spiritual communion'. Might these and other events that have marked the recent history of Medina Gounass, prelude the end of the isolationist posture of this Sufi order?

Beyond the State

It is true that with these developments, a degree of ambiguity entered this religious community. Notwithstanding the many internal problems, which continued during the 1990s, Medina Gounass has not lost all of its original appeal. It is still a large community – approximately 14,000 inhabitants – guided by Ahmed Tijan Ba. So far, no official state structures have been created in the village. Religious and secular matters are still dealt with by the *thierno*, who is admired and venerated by his many adepts.

Though agriculture forms the most important source of income for the *thierno's* followers, commercial activities are expanding quite rapidly. Successful businessmen have gone abroad, securing a steady flow of income to the community and thus to its leaders. International relations have always been vital for the community; but today, they seem to have become even more important. Many followers migrated to Europe and America while important sums of money found their way back to Medina Gounass. This trend, which seems to be accelerating in the last years, enabled the community to

reinforce its autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Senegalese state. The financial resources pouring into the community from abroad clearly bypass the state, in contrast to the income generated by cash-crop cultivation which had to be sold directly to the state-controlled companies.

The benefits of success, measured by the impressive housing facilities some of the migrants constructed in Medina Gounass, are entirely attributed to the *thierno*. Considerable sums of money are given to him in gratitude and in order to ensure further financial success. In the eyes of the followers, their material success is only intelligible in terms of the *thierno's* saintliness and his ability to teach the 'right path'.

Medina Gounass has always been a major centre of learning, attracting many students from neighbouring communities and abroad. Most children only attend the Qur'an schools in the community, generally run by the disciples of the *thierno*. They learn to memorize portions of the Qur'an and the basic ritual obligations. In this part of the country, the traditional learning centres are not challenged by state institutions. The *arrondissement* of Medina Gounass traditionally has an extremely low degree of modern education (4.23% in 1998). This points not only to the difficulties of implementing educational policies but also to the importance people attach to Muslim education.

Faced with a situation in which crowds of unemployed (but often well-educated) youth dwell the streets of nearby Tambacounda, parents feel that Qur'anic education is much more effective for transmitting Islamic knowledge and moral values to their children. In this regard, the education provided by a Muslim community that acts as a *contre-société*,⁴ is very much compatible with the social and economic circumstances of contemporary Senegalese society. ♦

Notes

1. Y. Wane (1974), 'Ceerno Muhamadu Sayid Baa. Le soufisme intégral de Madiina Gunaas (Sénégal)', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 56, XIV-4, pp.671-698.
2. E. van Hoven (1996), 'Local tradition or Islamic precept? The notion of zakat in Wuli (Eastern Senegal)', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 144, XXXVI-4, pp.703-722.
3. M. Magassouba (1985), *L'Islam au Sénégal: Demain les Mollahs? La 'question' musulmane et les partis politiques au Sénégal de 1946 à nos jours*. Paris: Karthala.
4. C. Coulon (1988), *Les Musulmans et le Pouvoir en Afrique noire: Religion et contre-culture*. Paris: Karthala.

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