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Faithful Journeys: Unpacking the Religious Luggage of Senegalese Murid Migrants in Europe

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Abstract

This contribution aims to approach the theme of a traveling Islam by starting from moving people and considering how their religious “luggage”—in terms of beliefs, ideas, and practices—travels with them and what this means for the circulation of religious ideas in Africa and beyond. The paper focuses particularly on Senegalese migrants of the Murid Sufi order residing in Italy and the Netherlands; it investigates how their religious luggage is important to them in the migration context and may circulate further from there. In addition, it explores how their religious luggage is moulded in, and through, their migration experiences: for instance, its meaning may change, or another layer may be added. Finally, ideas on (the force of) the Muridiyya may travel back to Senegal, adding other layers to the meaning of religion there as well.

Keywords

embodied religion – Islam – Muridiyya – Murid diaspora – Senegal

Introduction

“The fact that you carry your religion with you is something that radiates,” Moussa tells me. “I was at the airport and did not have any outward signs that I am a Muslim, but a Turkish man approached me and greeted me: *salām‘alaykum*.”

While most contributions to this special issue on “Traveling Islam” take traveling religious texts and ideas as their starting point and main focus, in this paper, I will start from moving people and consider what they carry in terms

of religious “luggage,” and what this means for the circulation of religious ideas in Africa and beyond.

Evidently, Islam has travelled with moving people from its early beginnings. Thus, Islam spread from North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa through the Almoravids’ moving southwards, as well as the trans-Saharan trade, whereas Islam landed on and spread along the East African coast through trade and economic migration across the Indian Ocean.¹ In later periods, migrant scholars helped the spread of Islamic knowledge and specific *tariqas* (Sufi orders) and visiting marabouts (religious leaders) brought various local *taalibes* (disciples) and their communities into contact with new religious ideas and teachings.² In this paper, I will take a more contemporary perspective, looking at present-day migration movements from Senegal to Europe. More specifically, I will focus on Senegalese migrants of the Murid Sufi order residing in Italy and the Netherlands, investigating how their religious luggage is important to them in the migration context and may circulate further from there. In addition, I will explore how religious luggage is moulded in, and through, their migration experiences: for instance, its meaning may change, or another layer may be added. Finally, ideas on (the force of) the Muridiyya may travel back to Senegal, adding other layers to the meaning of religion there as well. At this point, it is important to underline that I do not aim to identify major shifts in the Murid religious tradition, but that I rather seek to focus on the personal and nuanced understandings of people and the ways in which their religion is meaningful to them. In addition, I do not take “luggage” to connote something burdensome, but rather something that is precious and has value to the person that carries it. Religious luggage in this paper then refers to the religious beliefs, ideas, and practices that moving people carry with them as meaningful assets on their journey.

The main gist of my argument is that, by focusing on moving people instead of texts in investigating the circulation of religious ideas, it becomes possible to pay attention to the close intertwinement of experiences and religious ideas and to come to an understanding of how religion is an embodied phenomenon, rather than only something that is “out there,” laid down in texts or captured

1 N. Levtzion and R.L. Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2000.

2 J.L. Triaud and D. Robinson, *La Tijâniyya: une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique*, Paris, Karthala, 2000; H. Adama and A.M. Amadou, “Modibbo al-hâjj Usmanu (1884–1970): The Life of a Muslim Teacher and Judge in Bogo (North Cameroon),” *Sudanica Africa: A Journal of Historical Sources* 9 (1998), p. 71–89; A-R. M.B. Solagberu, “An Examination of the Emergence of Faydah at-Tijaniyyah in Ilorin, Nigeria,” *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, 8/1 (2018), p. 63–78.

in other religious materiality. This embodied and sensory aspect is particularly important for West African Sufis like the Murids, for whom spirituality has a strong mystical connotation.³ Merely looking at texts and ideas as objects would not do justice to their embodied experiences of religiosity, nor would it make apparent how their embodied experiences mediate and give meaning to texts and ideas. What is more, precisely these felt experiences of religiosity and how Murids express them, make that the Muridiyya becomes attractive to others and starts to resonate beyond the Senegalese Murid community itself.

In the following, I will start by briefly sketching the development of the Muridiyya, a Sufi order that was founded in Senegal at the end of the nineteenth century. I will show that travel and movement have been important to the Sufi order's history in different ways and how, in this way, the act of moving also has taken on significance to the Murids' religiosity. I will then elaborate on Senegalese migration to Europe, putting migration to Italy and the Netherlands in the broader perspective of current Senegalese transnational mobility. Some stories of Murid migrants will then be presented to show how their religion is important to them in the migration context. Next, a comparison between Italy and the Netherlands will yield insight into the conditions for the spread of the Muridiyya beyond the Senegalese and West African migrant community. Finally, I will look briefly at how religious experiences and discourses cultivated and sustained in the migration context travel back home.

The empirical data for this paper were collected through ethnographic fieldwork in Italy (Brescia and its surroundings) and Senegal (Dakar and the area of Touba) in 2005, with some shorter follow-up visits in the years thereafter, as well as interviews with Murid migrants in the Netherlands (Amsterdam) in 2020 and 2021. The names of the informants have been changed in order to safeguard their anonymity.

Traveling Religion: the Birth and Spread of the Muridiyya

The Muridiyya Sufi order was established by Ahmadou Bamba in late nineteenth-century Senegal in the context of weakening traditional social structures and French colonial encroachment. It was in this era that a new generation of religious and popular leaders emerged, such as Abdoulaye Niasse (1840–1922) and Malick Sy (1855–1922), who each founded a local branch of the Tijaniyya

3 C.A. Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853–1913*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2007.

Sufi order. Ahmadou Bamba (1853–1927), founder of the Senegalese order of the Muridiyya, was also part of this new generation of leaders.⁴

Bamba was a pious man from a maraboutic family, who started to attract followers because of his asceticism and his Islamic knowledge.⁵ He established his own community and founded the village of Touba⁶ in Central Senegal circa 1888 to 1889.⁷ The French colonial administration suspected him of organizing a resistance movement and after having dispersed his followers one time—albeit in vain—decided to exile him, first to Gabon (from 1895 to 1902) and later to Mauritania (from 1903 to 1907). During his absence his popularity grew, however, and the number of followers continued to increase after his return to Senegal. He was first put under house arrest far away in an isolated village, as the French thought they could better control and supervise him there, but he later received permission to move to the city of Diourbel, close to Touba. Gradually, a relation of accommodation developed between the colonial administrators and Bamba. The latter started to engage in groundnut cultivation while he continued writing and teaching an ever-increasing number of followers.⁸ After his death, his eldest son assumed leadership, becoming the first *khalif général*⁹ of the Muridiyya, while the movement continued to grow. Groups of *taalibe* (disciples) started to grow groundnuts under the guidance of local marabouts. Over time, these installations (*daara*) transformed into real villages and contributed to the gradual agricultural colonization of the Senegalese hinterland.¹⁰ The Muridiyya remained a rural phenomenon until the 1970s, at which point the Murids increasingly started migrating to cities such as the Senegalese capital Dakar and, from the 1980s onward, also

4 See also D. Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2000.

5 Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*; F. Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of 'Ajami and the Muridiyya*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

6 Note on spelling: in this paper I have chosen to adhere to the internationally better known French spelling for names of people and localities and to not use the Wolof spelling, so Touba instead of Tuubaa, Baye Fall instead of Baay Faal etc.

7 *Ibid.*

8 For an elaborate discussion and interpretation of the various phases of Bamba's public life, see the excellent studies of Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*, and Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World*.

9 He was later followed by other sons, before leadership was turned over to Bamba's grandsons in 2007.

10 P. Péliissier, *Les Paysans du Sénégal. Les civilisations agraire du Cayor à la Casamance*, Saint-Yrieux, Imprimerie Fabrègue, 1966.

internationally. Nowadays, the Murid network spans the globe, spreading from Touba to New York, Milan, Cape Town, Tokyo, Guangzhou, and Buenos Aires.¹¹

It is argued that this expansion of the Murid Sufi order is importantly influenced by some of the order's main features, including the strong personal relationship between a *taalibe* and his/her marabout—which also contributes to strong group identity and solidarity—and the Murids' strong work ethic. In the latter respect, one of Cheikh Bamba's first and most fervent helpers, Ibrahima Fall (1855–1930), has been very important. He organized much of the collective work within the Muriddiya and established the idea of hard work as a form of adoration.¹² This idea is supported and cultivated by Murids in general, but especially by one subgroup of the Muridiyya, the Baye Fall, many of whom substitute hard labor and dedication to their marabout for usual Muslim practices like praying and fasting.¹³

Murids in Italy and the Netherlands

From the 1970s onwards, Senegalese started emigrating to cities in other countries, first within Africa and then also overseas, mainly to France, the old colonial power, but increasingly to Germany and the US as well. Italy started receiving Senegalese migrants from the mid-1980s onward. Their numbers rapidly increased at the end of that decade, when the establishment of visa requirements in France and Germany coincided with the adoption of a regularization policy in Italy.¹⁴ The first Senegalese migrants came via France, but then started arriving directly from Senegal, with southern Italy as their main destination and street vending as their main activity. Increasingly, however, they shifted to the North, where workers were needed in the factories in the economically booming regions. This northward movement was stimulated by a law adopted in 1990, which stipulated that in order to receive a residence

11 M. Diouf, "The Senegalese Murid Trade Diaspora and the Making of a Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1 (2000), p. 19–30; C.A. Babou, *The Muridiyya on the Move: Islam, Migration, and Place Making*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2021; M. Lo and A. Nadhiri, "Contextualizing 'Muridiyyah' within the American Muslim Community: Perspectives on the Past, Present and Future," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 4 (2010), p. 231–240.

12 Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*, 2007.

13 For a nuanced understanding of this controversial figure, see, for instance, Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World*, and Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*.

14 O. Schmidt di Friedberg, *Islam, Solidarietà e Lavoro. I muridi senegalesi in Italia*, Turin, Edizioni Della Fondazione Agnelli, 1994.

permit, one had to have a work contract. On the basis of this law, there were frequent regularizations of immigrants illegally residing in Italy. As a result, in 1994, there were 24,615 Senegalese with legal residence in Italy;¹⁵ in 1997, there were 33,000, while in 2004, there were 48,000.¹⁶ According to the most recent statistics, 106,256 Senegalese nationals reside in Italy, of which 73.6 percent are male and 26.4 percent are female.¹⁷ However, it is estimated that the population would be at least 30 percent higher if we consider the number of illegal residents in the country.¹⁸

The number of Senegalese migrants in the Netherlands is marginal compared to that in Italy. Based on official statistics, as of 2021, 2,164 Senegalese reside in the Netherlands,¹⁹ of which 884 are female. Including illegal migrants would also raise their population in the Netherlands by at least 30 percent. The number is still very small in comparison to Italy, however, as well as in comparison to other migrant communities in the Netherlands, such as Moroccans (414,186) and Surinamese (358,266). For a long time, Senegalese migrants were in large part musicians and dancers and/or migrated to the Netherlands because of a Dutch partner. Recently, young people have gradually been arriving from other parts of Europe. They come to the North, as the situation in southern Europe has worsened due to the economic crisis and the large number of migrants, which makes it ever more difficult to make a living.

Whereas the first important migration flows from Senegal to France mainly involved followers of the Tijaniyya Sufi order from the region of the Senegal River,²⁰ current Senegalese migration worldwide includes a high number of Murids. They may come directly from the rural heartland of the Muridiyya in the middle of Senegal or from big urban centers like Dakar, or they may circulate between diverse diasporic destinations.

15 O. Schmidt di Friedberg, "La cohabitation dans le Nord de l'Italie. Marocains et Sénégalais à Turin et à Brescia," *Migrations Société* 10, no. 55 (1998), p. 87–106.

16 ISMU, *Decimo rapporto sullo migrazioni 2004*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2005.

17 Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, *La Comunità Senegalese in Italia. Rapporto Annuale sulla Presenza dei migranti*, 2019, <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/Pagine/Studi-e-statistiche.aspx>.

18 M. Kaag, "Transnational Elite Formation: The Case of the Senegalese Murid Community in Italy," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.815410>.

19 <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/37325/table?ts=1637419998594>.

20 See S. Bredeloup, *La diams'pora du fleuve Sénégal: sociologie des migrations africaines*, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Mirail; Paris, IRD, 2007.

Senegalese migrants are mostly men between the ages of 25 and 50, and many of them have wives and children back home in Senegal.²¹ Increasingly, however, young unmarried Senegalese women have also been migrating.²² In comparison with other migrant communities, there are few requests for family reunification from the Senegalese in Italy and the Netherlands, and most people continue to see their future back in Senegal.

Migration is often as much a family strategy as an individual decision, and it is not unusual for an entire family to contribute financially to someone's departure. Migrants most often save as much money as they can to send back to Senegal to support their families and to invest, often in the construction of a house. Since not only mothers and wives, but also siblings or in-laws and their families may depend on these remittances, the burden is often quite high. Although resources may be deployed for the survival of families in the first instance, they are also often used to invest in social prestige through conspicuous consumption, including substantial expenditures during feasts and investments in housing, furniture, and clothing.²³

While migration to Europe is an ambition for many Senegalese, and migrants are viewed in a very positive light as those who have made it in life,²⁴ their reality in Italy and the Netherlands is often quite harsh. They may live in overcrowded houses²⁵ and be stuck in jobs without advancement opportunities, such as street peddling or doing the dirty work in factories. With respect to the latter, they often work via employment agencies on short-term contracts of three months, which makes them rather vulnerable. Further, European society in general is not welcoming in many respects, and it is not rare that Senegalese migrants report incidences of racism and discrimination. In Italy, the rather permissive immigration legislation of the 1990s changed in the 2000s with the Bossi-Fini law of 2002. The basic motive underlying this law was greater oversight of migrants, while integration was relatively ignored in comparison

21 See also D. Hannaford, *Marriage Without Borders: Transnational Spouses in Neoliberal Senegal*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

22 Les Nouvelles du Pays, *Mensuel d'information Sénégalaises édité en Italie (2005): 'Jeunes filles Sénégalaises en Italie'* (June 2005), p. 3.

23 See also B.A. Buggenhagen, "Prophets and Profits. Gender and Islam in Global Senegal," PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2002.

24 While this vision is still largely predominant, it must be noted that it is slowly changing, especially with the number of migrants dying at sea and in the desert while trying to reach Europe, and the increasing number of returnees whose endeavors failed.

25 See also M. Kaag, "Mouride Transnational Livelihoods at the Margins of a European Society: The Case of Residence Prealpino, Brescia, Italy," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (March 2008), p. 271–285.

with previous legislation.²⁶ This greater oversight has been made possible, for instance, by the fact that the duration of a residence permit was reduced from two to four years to just one to two years. In recent years, Italy has experienced a large influx of African migrants arriving on its southern shores by boat. Many Italians feel abandoned by the rest of the EU in dealing with this migrant crisis, and the rather uncontrollable number of arrivals has contributed to a tense atmosphere and sometimes explicitly negative attitudes toward migrants.

In the Netherlands, the enforcement of rules and laws is stricter than in Italy, which makes it more difficult for migrants without a residence permit to have access to jobs and housing. Migrants may work on another one's fiscal number. Unlike Italy, the Dutch economy is not based on small-scale industry, but rather on the skilled services sector, which makes it difficult for many migrants to earn a decent living other than surviving on low-paid and marginal jobs.

In these migration contexts, the characteristics of the Sufi order—including the strong personal relationship between a marabout and his disciples, work ethic, and a strong sense of solidarity—assume particular importance. For the Murids in Italy and the Netherlands, this means, for instance, that they can depend on the help of their fellow Murids in hard times. Mutual help particularly entails the reception and accommodation of newly arrived migrants, the provision of merchandise as a loan, and support in contacting the administration and employers.²⁷

As in other countries,²⁸ the Murids in Italy and the Netherlands organize in religious associations called *dahiras*. There are regular meetings during which financial contributions are collected from members. These serve as a working fund and finance gatherings and religious events, during which the performance of religious songs is an important activity.²⁹ In addition, the money collected may be offered to the marabout to whom the *dahira* is dedicated or be contributed to projects of the Murid brotherhood in Senegal, including public works in Touba. The *dahira* is also an association of mutual help and solidarity, but it is mostly oriented toward finding solutions for individual cases. It is therefore not very well suited to solving communal problems, such as practical

26 ISMU, *Decimo rapporto*.

27 M. Mboup, *Les Sénégalais d'Italie. Emigrés, agents du changement social*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000; Babou, *The Muridiyya on the Move*.

28 Babou, *The Muridiyya on the Move*; M.C. Diop, "Fonctions et activités des dahiras mourides urbains (Sénégal)," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 3 (1981), p. 79–91; G. Salem, "De la brousse sénégalaise au Boul'Mich: le système commercial mouride en France," *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* 21/1–3 (1981), p. 267–288.

29 C. Dang, "Pilgrimage Through Poetry: Sung Journeys within the Murid Spiritual Diaspora," *Islamic Africa* 4/1 (2013), p. 69–101; Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World*.

problems related to migration and integration in a more structural sense.³⁰ Moreover, there is often only a small number of active members, with others participating only during major events or when the marabout is coming to visit his *taalibes* (disciples).

During these occasions, the strong community spirit of the Murids becomes particularly apparent. It also manifests, however, in more informal meetings between friends and in the fact that many Murids share a house or apartment with fellow Murids. It is evident that this community spirit and solidarity are perceived positively by many Murids in the diaspora, as it helps them to cope. On the other hand, the commitment to one's own group makes it more difficult or less urgent to mingle with European society, which contributes to the fact that Senegalese migrants—even after years of stay in Italy or the Netherlands, for instance—may remain rather at the margins of the host society. The requirement of solidarity means that when people become better off, they also often shoulder a greater financial burden. In theory, Murids may show less solidarity than expected and then have to reckon with measures from the group, varying from temporary neglect to total isolation,³¹ but in reality, such asocial behavior is uncommon. Sometimes, Murids may retreat from their community in order to avoid the group pressure to show financial and/or social solidarity.

The foregoing has particularly addressed the importance of the Muridiyya for Senegalese migrants in an economic and social sense. Being a Murid, however, is also important in a psychological sense. Murids in Italy have often told me, for instance, that their faith gives them the strength to deal with racism and discrimination.³² They have a strong sense of self-respect (*jom*)³³ and are proud to be Murids.³⁴ They say that this conviction helps them ignore prejudices and not succumb to feelings of inferiority when others treat them as less-than. In addition, being Murid means being patient and optimistic: even if one's situation is bad now, with the help of God and “Serigne Touba”—the

30 See also Mboup, *Les Sénégalais d'Italie*.

31 See also S. Sylla, *La philosophie wolof*; Dakar, IFAN, 1994.

32 For a further elaboration of how this is rooted in Murid education, see Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World*, ch. 2 and p. 239; C.A. Babou, “Educating the Murid. Theory and Practices of Education in Amadu Bamba's Thought,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33/3 (2003), p. 310–327.

33 Sylla, *La philosophie wolof*; M. Kaag, “Trust, Mistrust and Cooperation in a Senegalese Rural Community,” in *Trust & Co-operation: Symbolic Exchange and Moral Economies in an Age of Cultural Differentiation*, ed. P. Smets, H. Wels, and J. van Loon, Amsterdam, Het Spinhuis, 1999, p. 83–96.

34 F. Ngom, “Murid Identity and Wolof Ajami Literature in Senegal,” in *Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa*, ed. Augustine Agwuele, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 62–78.

term Murids often use to refer to Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba—one's situation may one day improve.³⁵

Faithful Journeys

In talking to Murids in Italy and the Netherlands, they often relate their migration journey and diasporic experiences in religious terms. Their traveling is (also) considered a religious act, and framed by them as spiritually inspired, motivated, and justified.³⁶

Thus, the life of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba is a source of inspiration and pride for Murids. He is considered a hero of resistance against the Europeans in the colonial era, albeit that his resistance was peaceful and consisted in following the path of God. They often associate their own migration experiences and the problems they encounter abroad with the suffering of Serigne Touba when he was exiled to Gabon and Mauritania by the French. In addition, as he is the founder of an African/Senegalese Sufi order, they also see him as a symbol of the pride of the black Muslim vis-à-vis other (Arab) Muslims. Thus, whenever Murid *taalibes* meet and talk about the suffering and miracles of Serigne Touba, their feelings of pride and dignity are continuously nurtured.³⁷ Indeed, it is not uncommon to encounter migrants from both Senegal and neighboring West African countries, such as Guinea and the Gambia, who have become Murid after their arrival in Italy, precisely because they witnessed how the Murids were able to self-confidently cope with racism, discrimination, and other difficulties, helping and encouraging each other. They mould and perceive their migration experiences following the founder of their brotherhood.

Mamadou is in his thirties and came to Italy some years ago after having worked in the Ivory Coast for ten years. He shares an apartment with five other Senegalese men. All of them are Murid; a huge portrait of Serigne Touba on the wall dominates the living room. On Sundays, they may watch DVDs of the Grand Magal in Touba. The images of Touba make them sigh with nostalgia, and they start to discuss Serigne Touba's power and miracles with great fervor.

35 See also Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World*.

36 In fact, the preparation of their journey most often also implies a religious preparation, such as visiting their marabout to obtain his blessing. Marabouts may also prepare them *gris-gris*, amulets containing Qur'anic verses, in order to protect them during their dangerous journey to Europe across the Sahara and by sea. See also the beautiful and impressive documentary *Taamaden* by Seydou Cissé (2021).

37 See also Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*, p. 136–139.

Mamadou alternates working in a factory with trade. In the summer, he is a street vendor on the coast. He finds it hard to be a street peddler on the beach, as he thinks European norms are quite debased, as exemplified by the nudity of the beach tourists. But he is a trader by heart, and in a good season, one can earn more by vending on the coast than working in a factory in the same period. He sometimes tries to discuss the tourists' behavior with them. On Sundays, in the slow period during the hottest hours, he makes another tour of the beach to collect the *addiya* (the voluntary contribution from a *taalibe* to his/her marabout) from his fellow peddlers. In his free time, he is very active in his *dahira* as a member of the cooking force, preparing food for all the guests at feasts and celebrations. He likes it because it is hard manual work for the marabout and the community. He explains that while he is not a Baye Fall in the strict sense, every good Murid is in fact a Baye Fall, as the values of humility and service are important for all. Mamadou is the oldest son of a family of eight. His father died some time ago, and he is now the main family member responsible for them. His mother lives with his sisters and his brothers and their wives in a village in the Touba area. His wife, who is a cousin, also lives there. They married five years ago, just before Mamadou left for Italy. He has not returned to Senegal since then, but intends to go back next year to see his wife and family and attend the Grand Magal in Touba. In the family, everyone speaks of Mamadou with great respect. The compound is simple, but well kept. The only television is kept in the room of Mamadou's wife. She has decorated her room with large photos of her husband. She relates that he often calls her and gives advice on how to behave. Mamadou tells her, for instance, not to bleach her skin, as God made her this way and she has to be proud of it.

Djiby is thirty-two years old. He is a Baye Fall and has lived in Italy since he was eighteen years old. He is not very positive about those Senegalese who always remain in their own circle; he thinks it is also important to engage with Italians. When I asked him how he did this in the beginning, he explained that it was his faith that gave him the self-confidence and self-respect to look the other straight into the eye and to make contact: it makes one not care about prejudices or feel inferior. What is more, it also helps one to accept the other. He explains that faith must be based on fidelity and respect, first of all toward oneself. On that basis, one can find the way to God. And on that basis, too, one finds the way to the other, for if one has no respect for oneself, one cannot respect the other. At the same time, a Murid realizes that the remedy of man is his fellow, and therefore, a Baye Fall should always have the attitude of "I am less than the other," inciting him to live a life of humility, service, and hard work on behalf of God and the community. Djiby adds that, unlike the brain, the heart cannot say no to God. That is why it is the interior force of the

heart and the intuition that guides the Baye Fall. Djiby, who often has two or three jobs, married an Italian woman who converted to Islam after meeting him. Now that he is growing older, he has started to assume the role of religious advisor to other Murids. Because of his contacts, he may also sometimes help them with securing a fictional work contract to obtain a residence permit, “for the sake of Serigne Touba.”

Mame Diarra is a bright young woman who came to Italy with her husband. They have a three-year-old son. The little one is in Senegal with Mame Diarra's mother, because, she says, education is much better there. In Senegal, he will automatically adopt the values of Senegalese society, and it will be easier for him to receive a Qur'anic education. She says that she only started thinking about religion after she arrived in Italy. Two years ago, she started wearing a headscarf. After two months she took it off, but she resumed wearing it soon thereafter. Her husband does not object; her mother and sisters in Senegal, however, think she is a bit weird. She is an active member of her *dahira*, and when she went to Senegal last year, she had the opportunity to work on the maraboutic fields in the village of Khelcom for some days. When she talks about it, she actually starts to radiate.

Abdoulaye is an intellectual from an important family in Touba. All his friends in Italy treat him with great respect. He has a relatively good job at a factory. He explains that being a Murid in Italy is different from being one in Senegal. Whereas in Senegal, he took religion for granted, here in Italy, he feels that he has a mission to show that Murids are respectable and that the Muridiyya is good and worth following. In his spare time, among other things, he translates the works of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba into French and Italian. He is also a member of an association that organizes a yearly Murid cultural day in order to acquaint the Italian public with the life and works of Serigne Touba. He relates that the relationship with other Muslim communities is not always easy. “They think that we are fanatics,” he says, “and sometimes also that we worship Serigne Touba instead of God, which of course is nonsense. With the help of Serigne Touba, we come nearer to God; he is the way to God.”

Maimouna lives in Amsterdam with her Senegalese husband and their three children. She is very active in the Murid *dahira*, and with the other women in the group, she prepares food for the big religious events, such as the Grand Magal, the biggest feast of the Murids, commemorating Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba's going into exile in Gabon. Her two sons are doing well in Dutch school, and she speaks Dutch fluently herself. With love and pride in her voice, she says that her two-year-old daughter is a real Mame Diarra—Mame Diarra being Cheikh Ahmadou's mother and considered a saintly example of love, modesty, and perseverance. She relates that when she came to the Netherlands and started

a family, she did not know very much about religion; she had received some basic Qur'anic education when she was a small child, but other than this, all she knows is what she has learned from her husband, who comes from a maraboutic family. In the Netherlands, she started thinking more deeply about her faith and felt the urge to learn more. Therefore, she and a couple of other women from the *dahira* have started a religious learning group and have found a knowledgeable woman in Senegal who teaches them every two weeks via Zoom.

Moussa had lived in Italy for twenty years before coming to the Netherlands some ten years ago, after separating from his Italian wife and having lost his job due to the economic crisis. He is one of the senior members of the *dahira*. At certain times in his life, he was the example of a successful migrant, having married an Italian woman and fathering a child with her, and having many Italian and Senegalese friends, a house, and a stable job at a factory. Now in Amsterdam, in many respects, he has returned to the life he had known when he had just arrived in Italy, with no papers, no job, and competing for sleeping places in overcrowded migrant houses. But he finds his pride in running the *dahira* well and in acting as a moral guide to the arriving youngsters, who, as he puts it, are often not into religion but only into adventure and making quick money by any means. He looks old and tired, and talking about Serigne Touba, he becomes emotional: it is his piety and the honesty that exudes from his message that moves me, he explains; even if one is suffering greatly and does not know when better times will arrive, there is Serigne Touba's hopeful message that God is just.

Traveling Islam: Spreading the Word

In the context of this special issue and its purpose, viz. studying the circulation of ideas in Islam, it appears worthwhile also to explore whether—and if so, under what conditions and how—the Muridiyya spreads beyond the Senegalese migrant community. For this, it is interesting to compare the Italian and Dutch scenarios, as they represent rather different cases in this respect.

During my research in Italy, I found that, among Italians, there was quite some interest in and curiosity about the Muridiyya. They became interested in this community because of their interactions with Senegalese in the workplace or on the street. This has obviously been facilitated by the large number of Senegalese in Italy: they constitute a highly visible migrant group, and among them, the young street vendors in particular are very good at forming

rapport with Italians.³⁸ In addition, since the late 1990s, the Murid community in Italy has started to establish Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba centers, where they not only come together but also celebrate religious feasts, such as the Grand Magal. In these instances, they also invite local community leaders, such as the mayor and Catholic clergy, to attend the celebrations. This approach has been quite successful, and Murid associations have gained local recognition as consultation partners and spokesmen for the local Senegalese community. As I have shown elsewhere,³⁹ in the Islamophobic context of post-9/11 Europe, young Senegalese intellectuals in Italy have been quite successful in positioning themselves as being the “good Muslims” (as opposed to Arab Muslim groups) in Italian debates. In this way, they catered to a need felt in some parts of Italian society, especially in Roman Catholic circles, to engage in dialogue with “trustworthy” Muslims.

It is clear that the visibility of the Senegalese Murid community has also helped to attract Italians to convert to Islam. Some of these are Italians engaged in romantic relationships with Senegalese partners, but certainly not all of them. Murids are generally eager to eloquently share their adoration for Serigne Touba with non-Murids and non-Muslims, for instance, by relating the many miracle stories of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba. They are also often eager to invite interested people to become Murids themselves. One of my interlocutors organized meetings for Italians to teach them more about the Muridiyya and to prepare them for conversion (which entails reciting the *shahada*, the Muslim profession of faith, “I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah” in front of two witnesses). Bringing people to God is considered to be an extremely blessed act in Islam, and this is no different for the Muridiyya. In general, the Catholic character of Italian society has facilitated the conversion of Italians to Islam, including the Muridiyya. This often concerns people who have been disappointed in the Catholic church and are looking for a religious alternative that is more convincing to them.⁴⁰

This all stands in stark contrast to the situation in the Netherlands. In Dutch society, the Senegalese and Murid community remains quite invisible outside

38 See also B. Tiberi Venturucci, “Language and Intentionality: Exploring Agency in Language Use as a Marker of Identity among Senegalese Street Sellers in Florence,” MA thesis, Leiden University, 2021.

39 M. Kaag, “Transnational Elite Formation: The Case of the Senegalese Murid Community in Italy,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.815410>.

40 See also M. Mirshahvalad, “Converts and the Remaking of Shi’ism in Italy,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2020.1858596>.

of a small circle of Dutch people who are in romantic relationships with Senegalese partners and/or who are interested in Senegalese music and dance. The Murid community in the Netherlands is very much focused on establishing and maintaining their community spirit, which is already quite a challenge, as the group is small, dispersed, and varied in terms of educational and class background, profession, age, and legal status. Leaders of the *dahira* in Amsterdam have tried to connect with the Amsterdam mayor's office as the Murids in Italy do, but they have to compete with migrant communities that are far more numerous and considered more important from a policy perspective, such as the Surinamese, Moroccan, and Turkish ones. In addition, in Amsterdam, an integration policy directed toward ethnic groups has been replaced by one that is focused on civil society initiatives—⁴¹which does not easily fit Murid perspectives, experiences, and strategies as they are used to presenting themselves as Senegalese and Murids and act on, and propagate, that identity—often also building on examples from Murid communities in other migration contexts, such as Italy, France, and the USA. Finally, Dutch society is far more secular than Italian society, with the consequence that not many Dutch people are responsive to conversion initiatives by Murids—in contrast to a category of people in Italy who are disappointed in the Roman Catholic church and are searching for alternatives. However, as one of my Murid respondents pointed out to me, there is a growing interest in spirituality in the Netherlands, a longing for meaning in a postreligious and individualistic society, which may lead to an increased interest in Murid spirituality in the near future. The Baye Fall in particular stand out as an attractive spiritual example, with their colorful outfits and their individualistic filling in of their religiosity—not adhering to fixed rules and established institutions, but instead referring to a charismatic and mystical leader.

It appears that the question of whether Murid religious ideas and spirituality spill over into the host society must be answered by looking both at the character of the Senegalese Murid community and that of the host country, and the degree of connectivity⁴² between them, while opportunities for the spread of Murid religious ideas may also vary across time. The Catholic character of Italian society has appeared to be a better fit with what the Muridiyya has

41 Open Society Foundations, *Muslims in Amsterdam*, New York, Open Society Foundations, 2010.

42 For a more elaborate explanation and application of the term “connectivity,” see M. Kaag, “Comparing Connectivities: Transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad and Senegal,” in *The Social Life of Connectivity in Africa*, ed. M. De Bruijn and R. van Dijk, New York, MacMillan, 2012, p. 183–201.

to offer than Dutch secularized society, for instance, while the post 9/11 context in Italy has posed specific challenges but also opportunities for the expansion of the Muridiyya beyond its own community. It seems that in general, where Murid communities are still small and in a process of formation like in the Netherlands, they tend to remain somewhat inward looking, while also migration policies in the host countries play a role in facilitating or hampering the spread of knowledge about the Muridiyya in the host societies. I would like to suggest that these issues merit a more in-depth comparative research.

Traveling: Home

Murids in the diaspora maintain a multitude of relations with “home”. Home, that is their family in Senegal in the first place: their wives and children, their parents, and other family members. Even though many migrants go home for holidays only once in two years or even less (and if they do not have a residence permit, they do not even have any idea when they will have the opportunity to return), their family bonds remain strong. This is expressed not only in regular money transfers, but also in the fact that their view of the future is back in Senegal. In addition, modern communication technologies, particularly the mobile phone, have enlarged the possibilities for transnational agency and have made it possible for migrants to maintain fairly direct social and moral links with their families. On the one hand, they can more easily intervene in family affairs and give their instructions and advice. On the other hand, they are also more often and more directly solicited by their parents, for instance, if money is needed or a quarrel arises between the migrant’s wife and her in-laws.

“Home”, however, is also Touba, the religious capital of the Murids. This holds true for every Murid, but for the Murids in the diaspora, symbols like the Grand Mosque get additional meaning, as pride in being a Murid and nostalgia for home and Senegal merge. It is significant that many Murids in Italy, when asked where they come from, answer “from Touba,” while in reality they may come from elsewhere. It is the dream of virtually every Murid to build a house in Touba, and many have started to do so, as its many unfinished buildings testify.⁴³ Further, many public works in Touba, such as the hospital and the university, currently under construction, are financed in large part by the Murid diaspora. The yearly Grand Magal is the most important Murid religious event: it is the commemoration of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba’s departure to

43 Buggenhagen, “Prophets and Profits,” 2002.

exile and the beginning of his sufferings which he overcame by his exemplarity and the help of God. For the Murids, it means the celebration of Bamba's spiritual victory.⁴⁴ Many migrants try to be in Senegal around the date of the Magal. For them, the event takes on additional meaning in the sense that they mirror their own experiences abroad with the path of the Cheikh, and coming to Touba means the successful homecoming, celebrating his *baraka* (blessing) while also earning rewards toward their dual salvation (success in this life and paradise in the afterlife).⁴⁵ Those who cannot go to Touba celebrate the event wherever they are, recreating the sacred space of Touba in Marseille, Hartford, or Brescia. Gueye and Bava conclude that the internationalization of the Murid brotherhood goes together with a firm reterritorialization, Touba continuously being redefined as Murid migrants' point of anchorage by economic and symbolic processes.⁴⁶

The Muridiyya thus links migrants to Senegal. Being away, however, at the same time offers migrants new opportunities—or obliges them—to shape religion in new ways. We have seen that Murid migrants in Italy claim to have become more aware of their religion, stimulating them to make new choices about their religious behavior. In addition, they give traditions and events associated with Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba a new meaning, thereby also giving new meaning to their lives and experiences. The Muridiyya thus becomes an important psychological force in dealing with the hardships encountered in the migration context.⁴⁷ The Muridiyya not only takes on new meanings and new functions in the international migration context through migrants' active negotiations and adaptive strategies; international migration also changes the Muridiyya in Senegal, not just economically but also symbolically, through adding new symbols of success—the success of migrants, and by extension that of the Muridiyya itself.

44 Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World*, p. 190–191.

45 *Ibid.*

46 S. Bava and C. Gueye, "Le grand magal de Touba: exil prophétique, migration et pèlerinage au sein du mouridisme," *Social Compass* 48/3 (2001), p. 421–438.

47 What is interesting is that, in talking with migrants about this subject, they may at one moment follow a sociological discourse and say that their religion has changed by coming to Italy. At another moment, however, they may switch to a theological discourse by firmly stating that the Muridiyya always stays the same, namely such as it was meant to be by God and Serigne Touba.

Concluding Observations

In the foregoing discussion of Murid migrants in Italy and the Netherlands, I have used the concept of “traveling Islam” to look at what these migrants’ religious luggage, in the sense of valuable belongings, means to them. I have also explored how this religious luggage, including the ideas and practices that it contains, may resonate and travel further, both in the larger host society and back to Senegal. It should be noted that religious materiality—in the form of images of their marabout and texts written by Serigne Touba—are important to Murids in the diaspora, just as they are to Murids in Senegal. Many Murid migrant houses and rooms are decorated with the one iconic photo of Serigne Touba that is known, and/or the image of one’s personal marabout. Baye Fall in particular may visibly carry an image of Cheikh Ibra Fall over their colorful clothes. In addition, Murids may carry small booklets with *khassaides* (religious poems written by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba). These, however, are felt to be part of their embodied and sensed religion more than texts and materiality that exist on their own, explaining or carrying Islamic knowledge irrespective of the beholder. It is exactly the spiritual power of these assets that constitutes their force and offers strength and support to the bearer. In other words, the force of these materials is precisely in their embodying religion, just as the Murid feels his or her religiosity as an embodied spiritual force.

Particularly this embodied spiritual force—or “radiation,” as Moussa, mentioned at the beginning of this article, so eloquently put it—is what makes the Muridiyya also attractive to others. We have also seen, however, that the landing of Murid ideas and spirituality in the host society also depends on the traveler who carries this luggage, on his/her connection to the local context of arrival, and the connectivity of religious ideas with the spirituality and needs felt in the receiving country.

Finally, I have aimed to show that the Muridiyya and its meaning are also shaped in the diaspora and that this meaning travels back to Senegal, adding to religious practices and ideas about the power of the order there as well.

To conclude on a more general note, I think the concept of “traveling Islam” is promising for studying how religious ideas may spread—such as through the circulation of texts and literary genres—both spatially and over various linguistic boundaries, as has been the focus of most contributions to this special issue. In this paper, I have aimed to approach the theme of traveling Islam somewhat differently, starting with moving people and looking into how their religious luggage—in terms of beliefs, ideas, and practices—travels with them, and what it means to them (and others) in the diasporic context. The latter is important, as by directly linking religious ideas with people in the

aforementioned way, it becomes possible to add the circulation of religious meaning to that of ideas. Islam travels both in scriptural and embodied forms, carries ideas and meaning, and gets transferred and transformed in both cultural production and social encounters. Therefore, it would be most fruitful to combine both literary and social-science perspectives to grasp the full richness of a traveling Islam, an Islam that both inspires and supports people *and* fosters their cultural production—and in so doing, contributes to its traveling and evolving further.