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Letter to the Editor

Senegalese Sufism What would Rumi say?

It is my intent to join the debate on Sufism as I am writing this letter to the editor to bring the point of view of someone who is experiencing life in the western hemisphere with an African Islamic background. This point of view is of experiential nature since it relates to how Sufi practices have shaped the Senegalese Islamic landscape and how they have affected and even shaped people's day-to-day activities.

The Senegalese Islamic landscape is composed of a series of Sufi orders, named sects, or Tarikha. The most prominent Tarikha are the Tidjane with its many subgroups, the Muride, the Khadir, and the Layene. Each Tarikha is based on the teaching of a Khalif or Sheikh. Although very diverse, they all converge to the same aim, which is their adherence to principles defined by God in the Quran and implemented by Prophet Mohamed as described in his Sunna. Membership in a Tarikha is obtained by birth or by simple adhesion. Usually, parents raise

their children the way they were themselves raised by their parents; they inculcate principles and values of their Tarikha to the children who grow up to become part of the parents' sect. Sometimes, when children become adults, they may adhere to a different Tarikha. This may happen for many reasons, among which is the individual's adherence to the teaching of another Sheikh; in fact, as by osmosis, an individual may be impregnated with the values of a group, experience them, and find a place in that Tarikha. When this happens, the family is torn apart, because for the family, the person has stepped out of sacred and traditional boundaries that no one in the family was supposed to or even expected to consider approaching.

The Tarikha spiritual leaders not only made verbal sermons during their lives, but they also profusely wrote poems and books to teach and to draw the spiritual paths that guide their followers in their quest for the Truth, God and the Prophet

Mohamed. A visit to libraries in cities such as Tivaouane, Touba, NDiassane, Kaolack, and Yoff-Camberene could give the reader an idea of the extent of the mass of books written by the Sheikhs. Most of these teachings are recited or sung in religious ceremonies such as the Gamu in celebration of Mohamed, or the Magal in celebration of the departure of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba who was exiled by the French who feared he would lead a rebellion against their ruling of Senegal. The themes developed in their poetic writings were very diverse; they celebrated their love of God and prophet Mohamed, illustrated the omnipotence and omnipresence of the Creator, and also showed their endless recognition of Mohamed, who led them to Islam. The beauty of their Sufi poems would amaze Rumi who was tagged the “Sufi poet.”

I wonder what Rumi would say.

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