

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# From American to Cisse: Sufism and the remaking of diasporic ties across the Atlantic

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### Abstract

Since the 1980s, hundreds of predominantly working-class African-American Muslims have travelled or relocated to the rural yet renowned city of Medina Baye, Senegal. They were invited there by Shaykh Hassan Cisse, a Senegalese Islamic scholar and leader in the Tijani *tariqa* (Sufi order). This article focuses on the experiences of African-American and fellow diaspora Black Muslims living and learning with African Muslims in the Tijani hub of Medina Baye. It interrogates the assumptions, expectations and misunderstandings that characterize relationships between the two groups. I argue that, as members of the Tijani *tariqa*, diaspora Black disciples become integrated within the local system of collective care modelled by African disciples. Complicating analyses of African-diasporic exchanges that tend to differentiate and hierarchize the interconnected economic hardships facing diaspora Black and continental African communities, I argue that the relationship between these groups illustrates the role of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's branch of the Tijani *tariqa* as a counterhegemonic social movement offering new paradigms of social and economic reciprocity that enable Black Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic to mitigate the contemporary impacts of racial capitalism and global apartheid.

### Résumé

Depuis les années 1980, des centaines de musulmans afro-américains principalement issus de la classe ouvrière ont visité la ville rurale et néanmoins réputée de Médina Baye, au Sénégal, où s'y sont installés. Ils y avaient été invités par Cheikh Hassan Cissé, islamologue sénégalais et leader au sein de la *tariqa* tijaniya (ordre soufi). Cet article porte sur les expériences de musulmans afro-américains et autres musulmans noirs issus de la diaspora qui vivent et s'instruisent auprès des musulmans africains de la communauté tijani de Médina Baye. Il interroge les suppositions, les attentes et les mécompréhensions qui caractérisent les relations entre ces deux groupes. L'auteur soutient qu'en tant que membres de la *tariqa* tijaniya, les disciples noirs de la diaspora deviennent intégrés dans le système local de prise en charge collective présenté en modèle par les disciples africains. Par souci de compliquer les analyses d'échanges diasporiques africains qui tendent à différencier et à hiérarchiser les difficultés économiques interconnectées rencontrées par les communautés africaines continentales et noires de la diaspora, l'auteur soutient que la relation entre ces groupes positionne le rôle de la *tariqa* tijaniya comme un mouvement social contre-hégémonique qui offre de nouveaux paradigmes de

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réciprocité sociale et économique qui permettent aux musulmans noirs des deux côtés de l'Atlantique d'atténuer l'impact contemporain du capitalisme racial et de l'apartheid mondial.

## Resumo

Desde os anos 80, centenas de muçulmanos afro-americanos, predominantemente da classe trabalhadora, viajaram ou deslocaram-se para a cidade rural, mas de renome, de Medina Baye, Senegal. Foram aí convidados por Shaykh Hassan Cisse, um estudioso islâmico senegalês e líder do Tijani *tariqa* (ordem sufi). Este artigo centra-se nas experiências de afro-americanos e outros muçulmanos negros da diáspora que vivem e aprendem com muçulmanos africanos no centro de Tijani de Medina Baye. Interroga os pressupostos, expectativas e mal-entendidos que caracterizam as relações entre os dois grupos. Defendo que, como membros do *tariqa* de Tijani, os discípulos negros da diáspora integram-se no sistema local de cuidados colectivos modelados por discípulos africanos. Complicando análises das trocas diásporas africanas que tendem a diferenciar e hierarquizar as dificuldades económicas interligadas que a diáspora negra e as comunidades africanas continentais enfrentam, defendo que a relação entre estes grupos posiciona o papel do Tijani *tariqa* como um movimento social contra-hegemónico que oferece novos paradigmas de reciprocidade social e económica que permitem aos muçulmanos negros de ambos os lados do Atlântico mitigar os impactos contemporâneos do capitalismo racial e do apartheid global.

'American, give me money!' demanded Usman, a nine-year-old Senegalese boy, to Kareem as we stood in the tiled courtyard of the Grand Mosque of Medina Baye after *jummah* (Friday prayer). Kareem was a twenty-nine-year-old African-American Muslim disciple in the Tijani *tariqa* (Sufi order). Three years earlier, Kareem had left Washington DC and moved to Medina Baye, Senegal. Located in the rural region of Kaolack, Medina Baye was approximately three hours south-east of the capital Dakar. It was the headquarters of Senegalese Islamic scholar Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé's (1900–75) branch of the Tijani *tariqa*, the largest Sufi order on the African continent (Seesemann 2011). Shaykh Ibrahim, a noted pan-African and pan-Islamic scholar, established Medina Baye in 1930 as a city where his disciples could live outside the direct control of the French colonial government. In the near century since its founding, Medina Baye had attracted hundreds of thousands of Tijani disciples on an annual basis from throughout Senegal, Africa, its diaspora and the world – paralleling in scope the pilgrimage that Muslims took to the Islamic holy lands of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia (Kane 2021). In Medina Baye, Kareem lived with students and disciples from Senegal, the Gambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger, among other countries.

The first major wave of African-American Muslims began travelling to Medina Baye in the 1980s. They had learned about the city and the Tijani *tariqa* from Shaykh Ibrahim's grandson, Shaykh Hassan Aliou Cisse (1945–2008). Throughout his life, Shaykh Hassan regularly travelled to the USA and cultivated relationships with African-American Muslims throughout the urban centres of the country. Many ultimately joined the Tijani *tariqa* and took Shaykh Hassan as their spiritual guide. Shaykh Hassan and his early African-American disciples sought to rekindle African-American Muslims' connections to Islam, Africa and Islamic Africa that

had been forcibly severed by the transatlantic slave trade. In 1983, they collaborated to create the African-American Islamic Institute (AAII) Qur'an School,<sup>1</sup> an international boarding school for African-American Muslim students in Shaykh Hassan's home town of Medina Baye. In the forty years since it opened, AAI has educated hundreds of students from the USA, as well as from throughout Senegal, other African countries and other countries in the diaspora, such as the UK and Trinidad.

Back in the bustling courtyard of the Grand Mosque, Usman gave Kareem no customary Islamic greeting of *Assalamualikum* that the other Muslim women and men around us exchanged. Nor did Usman extend a handshake as he honed in on us from the hundreds of immaculately dressed children, youth and adults who milled around. Instead, after making his request in perfect English, Usman smiled widely, his right palm cupped and arm outstretched, a determined look on his face as he inched closer.

'Give you money? What? I'm a *talibe* [student] just like you. Give *me* money!' Kareem countered. Usman shrugged his shoulders, hesitating for a moment. He laughed and shook his head, reaching into the pocket of his light blue cotton trousers. Usman pulled out a 100 franc coin.

'*Amm*,' Usman said, meaning 'here' in Wolof. The coin was just enough for Kareem to buy some bags of filtered water or a piece of bread.

'*Jerejef*,' Kareem responded, thanking Usman in Wolof.

Throughout my years in Medina Baye, I heard many African residents call out in English 'American, give me money!' to those they perceived to fit the label. Almost always, the 'American' was a Black Muslim Tijani from the USA or the UK. The racialized trope of the (Black Muslim) 'American' was used to indicate those who, by virtue of their perceived US citizenship, were assumed to be wealthy. Often, as was the case with Usman, the African resident who made the demand knew few additional phrases in English but had memorized and repeated this one expression in the hope that it would encourage, or perhaps compel, the 'American' to give.

Usman and Kareem knew each other, though not well. They both attended AAI but were in different classes. Usman was not someone whom I had previously observed begging for money – a practice associated with *talibes*, or students who attended classical Qur'an schools in Senegal such as AAI (Ware 2014). *Talibes* were represented in the Senegalese popular imagination as vulnerable children forced to fend for themselves at the margins of society (Lahti 2019; Loimeier 2002). When Usman approached Kareem, he engaged the stereotypes of the *talibe* and the American, perhaps reflecting his hope that the tropes of the destitute student and the wealthy foreigner would work to his advantage. Kareem was tired of being solicited for money from neighbours who approached him with no pleasantries but simply with the expectation that he must give by virtue of his positionality as an American. In contending that he, as a *talibe*, was also in need, Kareem challenged the notion that his nationality was the marker that defined his interactions with people in Medina Baye. Kareem signalled his knowledge of Senegalese cultural norms of charitable giving towards *talibes*, in which the whole community was obligated to care for them (Ware 2014: 240).

<sup>1</sup> The school was originally called Nasrul Ilm, a reference to Jamiat Nasrul Ilm, which was the name Shaykh Ibrahim gave to his global spiritual community. Jamiat Nasrul Ilm is an Arabic phrase that translates as 'the community of beneficial knowledge'. Following the establishment of AAI as an NGO, the school became referred to by the name of the NGO.

Usman entertained Kareem's attempt to flip the script, parting with some of his own money perhaps in acknowledgement of the reality that he and his African-American peer were in similar financial situations. I observed such a role reversal on more than one occasion. In these instances, there was a humorous recognition that the African and diaspora Black Muslim were more similar than dominant narratives would suggest.

This article focuses on the experiences of diaspora Black Muslims living and learning with continental African Muslims in Medina Baye. It interrogates the assumptions, expectations and misunderstandings that characterize relationships between these two groups. I show how social life in Medina Baye is undergirded by practices of collective care, modelled most prominently by Tijani *shaykhs* and extended to all community members who strive to uphold a moral and religious responsibility to share their resources to sustain one another. I argue that, as members of the Tijani *tariqa*, diaspora Black disciples become integrated within the local system of collective care modelled by Africans. Complicating analyses of African-diasporic exchanges that tend to differentiate and hierarchize the interconnected economic hardships facing diaspora Black and continental African communities, I argue that the relationship between these groups illustrates the role of Shaykh Ibrahim's branch of the Tijani *tariqa* as a counterhegemonic social movement that offers new paradigms of social and economic reciprocity that enable Black Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic to mitigate the contemporary impacts of racial capitalism and global apartheid.

### **Legacies of slavery, colonialism, and global apartheid**

The transatlantic slave trade and the forced labour of enslaved Africans fundamentally shaped the development of the modern world. Through the system of racial capitalism, Western European nations and the USA exploited Black peoples' labour and land to achieve white capitalist accumulation (Robinson 1983). Enslaved Africans' labour enabled these countries to become major political economic powers (James 1938; Williams 1944). In the USA, white slave-owning families also accumulated personal wealth by extracting profit from enslaved Africans. Such wealth was passed down over generations and underwrote the success of numerous corporations and universities (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Wilder 2013). Today, even though many legal barriers facing African Americans have been removed, Black people continue to confront stark inequalities in various domains, including education, healthcare, housing, employment and incarceration (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Hinton 2017; Ladson-Billings 2006; Roberts 1997).

Africans on the continent also experienced dispossession and displacement. From European colonization to the post-independence era, Western European countries and eventually the USA economically exploited people and resources on the African continent, resulting in what Walter Rodney describes as the deliberate underdevelopment of Africa. Connecting this longstanding and ongoing process of unequal exchange, Rodney points out: 'In the first place, the wealth created by African labor and from African resources was grabbed by the capitalist countries of Europe; and in the second place, restrictions were placed upon African capacity to make the maximum use of its economic potential' (1972: 25). Once African countries achieved independence, they remained constrained by European ownership of African means of

production, international debt service payments, structural adjustment policies, and other predatory economic practices. The impact of Europe's underdevelopment of Africa was long term and widespread, from individual countries' precarious national economies to the everyday lives of generations of Africans who experienced inadequate healthcare, nutrition and education.

Once Senegal gained independence from France, it sought to promote its economic development through rapid modernization, mechanization of agricultural production and financial investment in rural farmers (Oya 2006). Yet France continued to exercise control over Senegal's economy, ensuring that 'existing French investments in industry would not be threatened by the transition to self-rule' (Boone 1990: 345–6). In the 1980s, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank's structural adjustment programmes, the Senegalese government reluctantly initiated a process of market liberalization and began withdrawing its earlier direct economic supports to farmers. In a country where more than 70 per cent of the population worked in the agricultural sector, the removal of these policies was felt widely. In 1994, France devalued the West African CFA franc currency used in Senegal, resulting in price increases for food, medicine and other necessities. If underdevelopment is a framework for revealing relationships of economic exploitation between nations, the impact of the underdevelopment of Senegal is exemplified by the wealth and socio-economic privilege held by white French people and other Europeans working in independent Senegal, as well as portrayals of the elusive promise of greater economic opportunity in Europe and the USA.

The processes that enabled the exploitation of Black people in the USA thus similarly fuelled the extraction of wealth from Africa. These interconnected processes are reflective of what Manning Marable (2008) argues is the defining problem of the twenty-first century – global apartheid, or the 'racialized division and stratification of resources, wealth, and power that separates Europe, North America, and Japan from the billions of mostly black, brown, indigenous, undocumented immigrant, and poor people across the planet' (*ibid.*: 4). Despite the structural exclusions that have left diaspora Black and African communities in similar positions of racialized economic marginalization, contemporary anthropological scholarship documenting the experiences of diaspora Black people who travel to the continent has revealed the perceived socio-economic inequalities between the two groups and the divergent ways in which they interpret the impacts of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism (Holsey 2008; Pierre 2012). This and other recent scholarship on the African diaspora emphasizes the hegemonies that emerge as different communities of African descent engage with one another (Campt and Thomas 2008; Williams 2018).

Leith Mullings charts an alternative relationship that emerged in the twenty-first century based on Black peoples' shared recognition of global apartheid. Mullings (2008) cites the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in South Africa as one of many counter-hegemonic social movements that 'take race as a space for organizing global social movements against the inequities of globalization and have the potential to transcend both the scope and the reach of earlier Pan-Africanist movements' (*ibid.*: 11). The WCAR enabled diverse groups of Black people to draw attention to their comparable

forms of discrimination due to the transatlantic slave trade, European colonization and globalized capitalism. The conference facilitated opportunities for these groups to exchange information and forge transnational alliances to challenge their overlapping conditions.

This article analyses Shaykh Ibrahim's branch of the Tijani *tariqa* as an instantiation of Mullings' notion of counterhegemonic social movements. Since the 1980s, diaspora Black and continental African disciples have converged in Medina Baye. This article examines whether and how their decades-long engagement with one another created opportunities for sustained dialogue and information exchange about their experiences confronting interconnected processes of racialized economic marginalization. By theorizing the Tijani *tariqa* as a counterhegemonic social movement, this article examines its potential in mitigating tensions that often characterize African-diasporic exchanges.

### Methodology

The data included in this article is drawn from a multi-sited ethnographic study that examined the educational experiences and self-making practices of African-American Muslim youth who migrated to Medina Baye. Based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Medina Baye and eight years of intermittent fieldwork in New York City, Atlanta, Detroit and Washington DC, the study employed participant observation, classroom observations at AAIL, and interviews with ninety-six youth, parents, teachers, administrators, alumni and community members, seventy of whom were African American and twenty-six of whom were African Tijani disciples from Senegal, Nigeria, Niger, Gambia, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Guinea-Bissau.

At AAIL, I conducted classroom observations during which I collected field notes of students' engagement, conversations among students, and interactions between students and teachers. For an additional period each day, I took on the role of a student and participated in classroom learning. I also collected field notes and conducted interviews throughout Medina Baye. I accompanied African Americans as they visited Tijani *shaykhs*, participated in communal worship activities, and generally moved about Medina Baye. To elaborate on insights gathered through participant observation, I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with African-American and West African students, teachers, scholars and adult disciples. In the USA, I conducted interviews and participant observations at events, fundraisers and other gatherings organized by African-American and West African Tijanis.

Over the course of my research, I spent time with Black Muslims from various countries. However, my research centres on the perspectives of African-American Muslims. I engaged three generations of African-American Muslims – youth who currently study in Medina Baye, adults who are the parents of current students and/or studied in Medina Baye during their adolescence between the 1980s and 2000s, and elders who are the parents and/or grandparents of young people who studied in Medina Baye from the 1980s onwards. Like Bianca Williams's (2018) work on African-American women who travel to Jamaica, I recognize that in some ways my approach 'reinscribes the privileges and hegemony associated with African Americanness', but I use the experiences of African-American Muslims 'as a starting

point for the discussion about diasporic community' (*ibid.*: 24). I chose to focus on African-American Muslims in order to develop a robust understanding of their efforts to forge diasporic ties to the people and place of Medina Baye over multiple decades. I sought to understand how they made meaning of their group's long-term presence in Medina Baye, and the expectations, responsibilities and possibilities that their sustained engagement fostered.

### Collective care and the finances that forge a community

Senegal is a popular destination for heritage tourism, a type of travel in which diaspora Black tourists visit the places and people that are significant to their histories as communities of African descent. In Senegal, the most well-known site of heritage tourism is the House of Slaves and its Door of No Return on Gorée Island. Now a museum and memorial, it was once one of the final exit points on the African continent for millions of people who were kidnapped and taken to the Americas. Scholarship on heritage tourism has illustrated the moments of disconnect that emerge at places such as Gorée Island as African-American and other diaspora Black tourists interact with West Africans, who often treat the former as wealthy foreigners whose diasporic longings can be commodified (Ebron 1999). These interactions between tourists and locals belie the narrative of presumed kinship between people of African descent.

Among the diaspora Black Tijanis I spoke with, many had gone to Gorée Island. However, numerous others who travelled to Medina Baye repeatedly or even lived there had never visited – either because they had not made the time or because they intentionally chose not to do so. Kareem had yet to visit Gorée Island. For those who visited and for those who did not, their time in Senegal did not centre on the country's most prominent heritage tourism site. Diaspora Black Tijanis tended to come to Medina Baye (often directly from the airport) at the personal invitation of their Senegalese *shaykhs*, to make *ziyara* (visitation) to spiritually esteemed Senegalese Tijani leaders, and/or to pursue Islamic education and spiritual transformation. This dynamic made them somewhat distinct from other diaspora Black people who came to Senegal. Hajjah Najah Abdus-Salaam, an elder Afro-Puerto Rican Muslim woman from Harlem, New York City, who had visited Medina Baye over a dozen times since 2000 and whose children attended AAI, spoke to this dynamic during a speech she gave in Harlem in 2019 at an event commemorating Shaykh Hassan. Hajjah Najah explained: '*Alhamdulillah* [praise be to God], because of Shaykh Hassan, I was able to return home to the motherland, not as a guest or a tourist, but to reconnect with my ancestry, my history through Gorée Island and Medina Baye.' For Hajjah Najah and countless other diaspora Black Tijanis, Senegal was a site of historical significance given their heritage as Muslims of African descent and a site of contemporary relevance where they were embraced by the Senegalese Muslims who lived there.

Hajjah Najah's husband, Imam Sayed Abdus-Salaam (1942–2017), was one of the first African Americans to visit Medina Baye. He, along with his wife at the time, Hajjah Salwa Abdus-Salaam (1952–93), travelled there in 1977. Hajjah Kareemah Abdul-Kareem, an African-American Muslim mother of five from the Bronx, New York City, also visited Medina Baye that year. Hajjah Kareemah returned for a longer



stay in 1982. Recounting this trip during an interview, Hajjah Kareemah recalled being amazed by the pervasive sights and sounds of children and adults reciting the Qur'an and *dhikr* (phrases of remembrance of God). She wanted her daughter to have that experience.

Once Hajjah Kareemah had returned to the USA, she handwrote an eight-page letter to Shaykh Hassan. She petitioned him to open an Islamic school in Medina Baye for students from the USA. She proposed that they charge an all-inclusive US\$200 a month per student. Hajjah Kareemah offered to be the den mother, housekeeper, or whatever job would be helpful in exchange for living in Medina Baye rent-free. Compelled by her suggestion, Shaykh Hassan co-founded with Hajjah Kareemah the African-American Islamic Institute (AII) Qur'an School in Medina Baye in 1983.

Many of the African-American students at AII came from working-class families. At least two alumni whom I spoke with who attended during the 1980s recalled that their parents took on side jobs to purchase their children's international plane tickets. Once students enrolled at AII, it was not uncommon for families to fall behind on the tuition payments – a trend that continues today. The current rate of US\$400 a month remains a burden for many families. Nonetheless, since the school's inception, administrators have ensured that all children receive an education and quality care regardless of their family's financial standing. Administrators did so by using their own resources or fundraising from wealthier community members.

During Shaykh Hassan's lifetime, he paid the teachers himself, provided a dormitory for African-American students, and covered the electricity and other expenses related to its operation; later, he housed many international students in his own home. Several African-American adults I spoke with remembered the frustration of some Senegalese residents, who they claimed did not understand why Shaykh Hassan spent out of his own wealth to care for these students. However, the adults remembered Shaykh Hassan explaining the importance of doing so. They recalled that Shaykh Hassan characterized his decision to allocate his own resources to ensure quality education for African Americans as a form of reparations owed to them by their African sisters and brothers. Thus, Shaykh Hassan's diasporic consciousness enabled a predominantly working-class community to participate in international travel and study abroad, opportunities that were often inaccessible to economically marginalized Black people in urban USA (Rahman 2021).

Although some African residents were reportedly less enthusiastic about Shaykh Hassan's financial sponsorship of African Americans, others were remembered as being more receptive. Cheikh Diery Cisse, a Senegalese disciple who was the general secretary of Shaykh Hassan's humanitarian organization, explained:

The fellow residents of Medina Baye were very happy, even I might say proud, to have their American brothers and sisters come to Medina Baye and study the religion of Islam. Because Islam is worldwide, and they could have gone to any other place in this world, but Allah made them choose Medina Baye. And the population of Medina Baye was very proud to have one of their sons, Shaykh Hassan, go to America, talk to them, explain to them Islam and the *tariqa*, and they accepted it and came to join him here.



Ahmed Sufi Muhammad, who was a teenage student at AAI from 1984 to 1989 and the first African-American *hafiz* (one who has memorized the entire Qur'an) to graduate from the school, described a similar sentiment. During his first six months in Medina Baye, Ahmed became fluent in Wolof – the primary language spoken there but one that was not formally taught at AAI. Yet despite the close friendships he developed, many of which remained strong decades later, *Hafiz* Ahmed explained: 'They knew about Muhammad Ali . . . but I don't think they knew the history of Islam in the US. For them, they felt that Shaykh Hassan brought Islam to the US.' In fact, many African Americans, including *Hafiz* Ahmed's parents, had become Muslim before they met Shaykh Hassan. However, Cheikh Diery's and *Hafiz* Ahmed's comments suggested that, for some African residents, the presence of African Americans in Medina Baye served as a testament to the pathbreaking missionary efforts of Shaykh Hassan.

Cheikh Diery, who has a near photographic memory, also remembered a conversation that Shaykh Hassan had with his father Seydi Ali Cisse (d. 1982). Cheikh Diery recounted:

[Shaykh Hassan] told me when he first came from America, his father called him one day and said, 'Hassan.'

[Shaykh Hassan] said, 'Yes?'

[Seydi Ali] said, 'Do you owe some people money in America?'

[Shaykh Hassan] said, 'No.'

[Seydi Ali] said, 'Then why are these people . . . ' – because at that time there was only one phone [in Medina Baye] and that was the phone of Seydi Ali – ' . . . then why are all these people calling you?'

[Shaykh Hassan] said, 'They are calling me just because of Islam. Some of them accepted Islam because of me. Some of them joined the *tariqa* because of me. And whenever they have things that they want to discuss or questions which they want to ask or to clarify, they call me. This is the only reason they are calling me, but I don't owe them any money.'

Seydi Ali reportedly held the initial assumption that the relationship between Shaykh Hassan and the African Americans was fuelled by financial factors. Yet, as Shaykh Hassan explained, what attracted the African Americans to Shaykh Hassan and the Tijani *tariqa* was their desire for Islamic knowledge. He recognized and cultivated this desire by answering their questions and making it financially feasible for them to pursue Islamic education in Medina Baye.

Shaykh Hassan's actions reflected the Senegalese cultural expectation that leaders provide for their followers (Wright 2015: 101). During European colonization and in the postcolonial era, West African Sufi communities maintained a level of autonomy from the state. Sufi *shaykhs* were not only their communities' spiritual leaders, but also their financial benefactors and social service providers (Sanneh 1989; Ware 2014). Sufi *shaykhs* served as the safety net, redistributing *hadiya* (monetary and other gifts) that they received from wealthier disciples to other disciples in need (Villalón 1995; Wright 2015). Through their daily practices, *shaykhs* modelled the religious,

moral and socio-political obligation to help others – exemplifying and encouraging what I describe as a system of collective care. This system of collective care helped the community reduce its dependency on the state. In most Senegalese Sufi communities, disciples tended to be local Senegalese people, but the Tijani community in Medina Baye was distinct in that it was a transnational movement that attracted followers from numerous countries (Seesemann 2011: 144). Although Shaykh Hassan’s willingness to subsidize his African-American disciples’ religious education might have drawn the ire of some African residents, the African Americans whom he provided for represented only a small segment of the broader community that he was responsible for supporting, the majority of whom were Senegalese.

After Shaykh Hassan passed away, his younger brothers Imam Cheikh Tidiane Aliou Cisse and Shaykh Mouhamadou Mahy Cisse took on his financial commitments. Imam Cheikh and Shaykh Mahy, as they were called by their disciples, sponsored older students such as Kareem who were not financially supported by their families. Kareem did not pay a monthly tuition fee at AAI, nor did he pay to live in his room at Imam Cheikh’s guesthouse. A Nigerien disciple who served as one of Shaykh Mahy’s main assistants told me that he estimated that Shaykh Mahy likely provided for nearly a hundred male students, and that the largest group among them was Senegalese. As had been the case during Shaykh Hassan’s time, African Americans such as Kareem were a small minority of students whose Islamic education was facilitated by the Cisse *shaykhs*.

The financial support provided by the Cisse *shaykhs* alleviated a burden for older students, who rarely if ever were employed in Medina Baye. In contrast to Dakar and other urban African cities, where the informal economy enabled entrepreneurial youth to economically sustain themselves (Honwana 2012; Scheld 2007), it was more difficult for young people to do so in rural areas. There were fewer formal employment options in Medina Baye. Prospects were slimmer for international students, who often lacked the language fluency or familiarity with the local context to attain high-paying jobs. Their primary occupation was thus that of a student.

Being a full-time student enabled Kareem and other older youth to dedicate their entire day to studying without having to worry about how to make ends meet. Back in the USA, Kareem had been underpaid and overworked. He juggled two jobs in restaurants as a line cook. He had little time to cultivate other interests, which included deepening his knowledge of Islam. He occasionally attended classes at the mosque if his work schedule permitted him to do so, and if he still had energy after a long day of physically taxing work. These short periods of Islamic study did not allow Kareem to advance as quickly or as deeply as he would have liked. His frustration in not being able to dedicate himself to his studies, coupled with the burden of constantly working only to make enough money to survive, propelled him to leave the USA. As Kareem participated in Tijani congregational worship events in Washington DC and cultivated relationships with African-American, Senegalese and Gambian disciples in attendance, they arranged for him to study in Medina Baye. Kareem’s membership in the Tijani *tariqa* and his relationship to the Cisse *shaykhs* enabled him to receive an international education that he might otherwise have been unable to access or afford.

Kareem and most diaspora Black Muslims who travelled to and studied in Medina Baye thus varied from the stereotypical portrait of heritage tourists. Diaspora Black

and African Tijanis converged in Medina Baye for similar reasons. Both groups understood it to be a spiritually significant site. As they strove for spiritual transformation, many members among both groups were in economically precarious positions and were sustained by practices of collective care enacted by their Cisse *shaykhs*.

### Assumptions and expectations of diaspora Black Muslims

Kareem's closest friends in Medina Baye were English-speaking students from Nigeria and Ghana. They often traded stories about their shared experiences struggling to survive the urban grind of Washington DC, Lagos and Accra. They reflected with gratitude about the fact that they had been able to come to a place where their priority could be cultivating spiritual growth. While Kareem found resonance with these friends, he also encountered natives of Medina Baye who yearned to relocate to the USA. Kareem recounted one interaction with a Senegalese classmate:

I kept asking, 'Why do you want to go to America?' He says, 'There's money there! We're poor here! We need to come back and build home and stuff!' So there's a Ghanaian brother [Jabbar] [in the class] who speaks very good English. I told him, like, 'Look, this is what's going on in America. Black people are being killed, being shot, poverty, you know, the history of America in terms of slavery, what was done to African-American males, in terms of being castrated, mutilated. African women were being raped in America, enslaved. They were subjected to constant rape, their daughters at early ages were raped.' And some of them, their jaw dropped because they actually don't know what we've been through in America, to be hanging from trees, these types of things. They actually don't know that, so to tell them that, they become more aware. But I know that they still do want to go to America to make money, because they feel like there's no other possibility. I tell them, 'Donald Trump is no good. He made it tough for people. The economy is no good.' But they just have it in their mind, 'I want to go to America or Europe to make money so I can come back and build a home.' Or, 'I need money. There's no money in Africa!' All that stuff. I can't figure out how people build homes [in Senegal] then. I ain't build no home here [in Medina Baye]!

Kareem had become conversant in Wolof, but not enough to clearly explain the horrors of US history. He relied on his Ghanaian friend Jabbar, who spoke English and Wolof, to help translate. Nuances articulated by both Kareem and his Senegalese classmate were likely glossed over or misunderstood due to language barriers.

According to Kareem, at least some of his African classmates imagined that life in the USA afforded all residents greater opportunities than were accessible in rural Medina Baye. Implicit in this perspective was the assumption that the USA was the land of prosperity regardless of one's race, and, as such, that Africans could achieve upward economic mobility if they migrated. Some of Kareem's classmates reportedly insisted that international migration would enable them to accumulate the wealth necessary to construct homes in Senegal. His male classmates' aspirations were likely linked to Wolof gender norms, in which being considered a man was often

defined by one's ability to build a house (Babou 2008: 13). Such aspirations were widely evident in Dakar, where transnational migrants sent money to build family homes as a way of maintaining belonging in Senegal and of transforming their country's future while living and working abroad (Melly 2010). His classmates' interest in international migration therefore did not necessarily indicate their investment in a country built on the exploitation of Black people. Rather, their perspectives seemed to be informed by their assessment of the limited opportunities for economic mobility in their rural context and their desires to stake out more prosperous futures outside Senegal. Grappling with the effects of structural adjustment policies, the legacies of European colonization and the deliberate economic underdevelopment of Africa, Kareem's classmates reportedly explained that 'they feel like there's no other possibility' than to leave. International migration might then be understood as a long-term strategy that allowed continental Africans to uphold an ethic of collective care. Senegalese migrants could send remittances and enhance the quality of life of their loved ones who remained behind. At the same time that these classmates envisioned, according to Kareem, a path to home ownership in Senegal, African Americans in the USA were often unable to purchase their own homes because of redlining, predatory lending and other racist practices (Taylor 2019).

Kareem's claim that home ownership was easier in Medina Baye underscored his view of the persistent barriers confronting Black people in the USA and his perspective that there were greater economic opportunities in Senegal. In fact, during the 1990s, Shaykh Hassan designated unoccupied land for his African-American disciples in a town close to Medina Baye, envisioning that they would develop the town (which he named Kossy Atlanta) into a thriving African-American enclave. While construction in Kossy Atlanta never materialized, at least ten African Americans have since purchased land or homes in or around Medina Baye. Although the cost of real estate has skyrocketed in recent years, one could purchase land in 2022 from around US\$15,000 – with the understanding that construction might cost at least US\$60,000 but would take place piecemeal as the owner provided cash funds. Thus, home ownership in and around Medina Baye seemed more feasible than in the USA.

In addition to the longer conversations that Kareem attempted to navigate in the classroom, he confronted requests for money from people he interacted with only briefly. Kareem explained:

They look at the TV and that's like their information source now, so now they see America and they automatically see you as a *toubab*, or that you have a dollar sign on your forehead. They don't know the social, economic, political circumstances in America, that some people are actually living a bit worse than they are . . . As shack as it might look, you actually have a four-walled home. You have food that's being prepared for you, even if it's your neighbour preparing a big bowl. Some people don't have that in America. They're on the street, no place to go, and then when they do go to the shelters, they get disrespected.

*Toubab* is a Wolof word used for white people, other foreigners, or Senegalese people who have become Westernized. The word generally describes a person who is perceived to be culturally different from and socio-economically more advantaged than

the average Senegalese person (Curry 2009; Riccio 2005). *Toubab* holds similar connotations as *obruni*, a word used in Ghana to describe African-American heritage tourists and students studying abroad, much to their disappointment (Hartman 2008). Kareem expressed frustration that he and other working-class African Americans were called *toubabs*, when their daily experiences and economic struggles were similar to those of their African neighbours.

Unlike a heritage tourist who might travel to Senegal only briefly, diaspora Black Tijanis sought to regularly visit if not stay for extended periods. While Kareem faulted the media for propagating distorted narratives, the fact that diaspora Black disciples lived in community with Africans suggested that they had opportunities to engage in dialogue and develop more nuanced understandings than were broadcast publicly. Because of their shared commitments to the Tijani *tariqa*, diaspora Black Muslims in Medina Baye had chances to develop more substantive relationships and sustained engagement with African residents, thus potentially unsettling assumptions held by both groups.

Whether this potential was actualized varied on a case-by-case basis. While Kareem was still learning Wolof, others among his African-American peers had become fluent. I also knew at least three Senegalese disciples, one Nigerien disciple and a disciple from Burkina Faso who had become fluent in English primarily by living with and befriending African-American students over the years. Having a shared language deepened bonds among neighbours and classmates who interacted regularly. I observed continental African disciples ask their African-American friends about the police murders in the USA that they had seen on social media. I heard African-American students explain to African friends about how much more expensive everything was in the USA. At Tijani gatherings in the USA, I regularly heard African-American alumni speak in Wolof with one another and with Senegalese disciples as they reminisced about Medina Baye.

To deepen diasporic linkages, Shaykh Hassan and his brothers encouraged marriages between African-American and West African disciples (Kane 2011: 99). One African-American alumna who married a Senegalese disciple shared in an interview that conversations about police brutality used to be a 'heated topic' with her husband. She reported that, early in her marriage, her Senegalese husband made comments such as 'Black Americans, y'all don't listen to the police and that's why people get killed', but she explained that his perspective shifted over the years. She concluded: 'It's conversation. I think the more we have these conversations with not just our own people but people all over the world, the truth is told. I think the perception changes.' Her comment and other moments of nuanced engagement between African-American and West African Tijanis demonstrated the impact of having a shared language and established relationships. While perhaps more conducive among peers in classroom settings, opportunities for dialogue were less likely to occur during brief, chance interactions between relative strangers such as Usman and Kareem and in public spaces such as the Grand Mosque.

In his commentary, Kareem pointed out that he observed how residents offered to share whatever they had with neighbours. Kareem argued that these practices, which I theorize as acts of collective care, were absent in the USA, where unhoused people were 'disrespected'. Kareem's comments suggested that the effects of poverty were less devastating for residents in the rural, communal Sufi society of Medina Baye than

for Black people in the capitalist USA. On numerous occasions, when I happened to walk by residents gathering to eat, I observed that their immediate reaction was to call out, ‘American, *kaay lekk!*’ – a Wolof-language invitation that meant ‘come eat’. It would not be unusual for the ‘American, *kaay lekk!*’ invitation to come from the same person who had demanded the previous day, ‘American, give me money!’ While these oft-repeated yet seemingly contradictory expressions could be misinterpreted as an indication of African Americans’ status as outsiders, they also reflected the deeply ingrained nature of collective care in Medina Baye, where all residents were expected to share rather than hoard their resources.

Another dimension that likely shaped some Senegalese residents’ assumptions, expectations and misunderstandings about African Americans’ wealth was their experience in a country where approximately two-fifths of people lived in poverty and three-quarters of families suffered chronic poverty (Seck and Terki 2020). Furthermore, a fifth of households in rural areas such as Medina Baye experienced food insecurity, in comparison to a tenth in urban areas (USAID 2018). The heightened challenges facing people in rural Senegal were not unlike those of Black people in the USA, where the poverty rate among African Americans is greater than among any other group (Economic Policy Institute 2020). Like families in rural Senegal, many Black families in the USA confronted a disproportionately heavier impact of poverty.

Yet these parallels did not dominate media depictions of Black communities in either place, nor were they salient among all Black Tijanis in Medina Baye, as Kareem concluded that people in the USA were ‘actually living a bit worse’. He reversed the claim made by some Africans that their lives were more difficult than those of the Americans. This reflected a tendency that often unfolded among marginalized communities, where groups compared and ranked one another’s plight, each one ultimately casting themselves as less privileged than the other. Jemima Pierre similarly recounts how a Ghanaian man perceived an African-American woman visiting Accra to be ‘one of the lucky ones’ in comparison to him and his peers left behind on the African continent (2012: 154). By recounting how slavery shaped the experiences of Black people, Kareem sought to illustrate the racialized economic challenges that some Africans presumed existed only in Africa. At the same time, obscured from Kareem’s conclusion that African Americans in the USA were ‘actually living a bit worse’ than Africans in Medina Baye was something Pierre points out: the recognition of the ‘links through the historical arc of slavery and colonialism – and the overlapping history of Blacks from the diaspora and those left behind on the continent’ (*ibid.*: 156). Although the similar processes of structural exclusions resulted in African Americans in the USA and Africans in rural Senegal feeling economic disenfranchisement more severely than the average person in each country, their overlapping experiences were at times understood as distinct. As Tijanis, diaspora Black and African disciples had opportunities to exchange information and unravel the distinctions between the two groups, yet this potential for forging transnational solidarities was not always actualized.

### **From American to Cisse**

Early one Friday morning, I walked with Bayyinah, a Black British woman, to the Western Union located near the towering white gate marking the entrance to

Medina Baye. We aimed to beat the crowd of residents, who, like her, would come to collect funds from family scattered throughout Senegal and the world. Like Kareem, Bayyinah was not employed in Medina Baye. For the last nine months, Bayyinah had given up lucrative paid jobs and had instead opted for an extended spiritual retreat away from the hustle, bustle and struggle of urban life in London. For Bayyinah and other Tijanis who made financial sacrifices in pursuit of spiritual advancement, their stays were facilitated by their *shaykhs*. Bayyinah had her own room on the second floor of Imam Cheikh's house. As was the case for Kareem, Imam Cheikh voluntarily covered the bulk of Bayyinah's expenses, from the daily plates of lunch and dinner that he had delivered to her room to the medication he paid for when she got malaria. As many disciples did, Bayyinah often gave *hadiya* to Imam Cheikh. This *hadiya* was a token of appreciation, as what most disciples gave did not compare with the amount the *shaykhs* spent in housing, feeding and educating them (Wright 2015: 101).

While Bayyinah had to spend very little to thrive in Medina Baye, she occasionally received money from her family. That particular morning, Bayyinah's mother had sent her a small sum – not much by UK standards but enough to buy juicy mangoes, pineapple-flavoured sodas and other minor luxuries Bayyinah enjoyed. As Bayyinah exited the Western Union, she was stopped by an elderly woman.

'Cisse, Cisse!' the woman repeated as she bowed her head and smiled at Bayyinah.

Repeating the family name of the person one meets was a customary part of Wolof pleasantries. In Medina Baye, having the last names Cisse or Niasse meant that a person was associated with the two most well-regarded families in the city. A Cisse was one who was related to Shaykh Hassan, Imam Cheikh, Shaykh Mahy and their father Saydi Aliou Cisse, who Shaykh Ibrahim had appointed as his top representative and immediate successor. A Niasse was one who was related to Shaykh Ibrahim himself. Members of the Cisse and Niasse families were honoured in everyday practice in Medina Baye. They were greeted with physical deference from Tijani disciples, asked to pray for others, given *hadiya*, and publicly acknowledged at the start of community gatherings. The elderly woman's gestures reflected these norms and indicated her recognition of Bayyinah as a Cisse.

The Cisses were expected to contribute significantly to the local system of collective care. As disciples who lived in their *shaykhs'* households, Kareem and Bayyinah had become intimately familiar with the communal obligations that the Cisse *shaykhs* upheld. They saw the large groups of people who gathered outside the *shaykhs'* homes, waiting for them to hand out crisp bills as they journeyed to and from the Grand Mosque for the five daily prayers. They observed the lines of women and men who came to visit Imam Cheikh and Shaykh Mahy in their parlours. They watched as residents leaned in to show the *shaykhs* bills for medical prescriptions or estimates to repair leaking roofs, or to explain other financial hardships. Kareem and Bayyinah saw the *shaykhs* reach into the pockets of their flowing garments and pass money to those in need.

In the USA, in the 1960s and onwards, as part of the influence of Black consciousness movements, many African Americans eschewed their legal European last names that bore the history of enslavement. They adopted Swahili and Arabic names to assert their individual self-determination and African identity (Onaci 2015; Umoja 2013). Many diaspora Black Tijanis adopted the last name Cisse in honour of their spiritual guides – mirroring a name change practice that was also common among



many continental African Tijanis. Some diaspora Black Tijanis replaced their European-origin last names. Others hyphenated their given or chosen Arabic last names with the name Cisse. Bayyinah had on several instances gone by the last name Cisse on social media. By calling themselves Cisse, diaspora Black and continental African disciples alike laid claim to an African Muslim family whose conversion to Islam reportedly dated back before the eleventh century and who were arguably the region's most notable clerical family (Wright 2015: 105–7). Among diaspora Black and continental African Tijani disciples who took on the last name Cisse, several explained to me that they did so because they saw their *shaykh* as their adopted or spiritual father. They said the sentiment was mutual, as Shaykh Hassan, Imam Cheikh or Shaykh Mahy treated them like members of their family, and in many instances explicitly referred to them as such. For diaspora Black Tijanis, taking on the Cisse name was not only a political or historical statement of individual self-determination; it was also a means of redefining their lineage – attaching themselves to a living, African Islamic genealogy through a tradition also practised by Tijanis on the African continent.

Bayyinah did not know the elderly woman who greeted her, yet the woman identified Bayyinah as a Cisse. As was the case when Usman summoned Kareem, African residents attempting to get the attention of diaspora Black residents tended to call them American. Bayyinah, though a Black 'Brit', had been called American on many occasions. However, in this instance, by addressing Bayyinah as a Cisse, the older woman communicated her sense of respect and esteem for Bayyinah.

'Maybe she meant it, or maybe she knew that calling me Cisse would get to me, but I had to give her something,' Bayyinah admitted to me. She took out a few bills from her newly acquired money and handed them to the woman.

In this social interaction, instead of being seen as an American heritage tourist unfamiliar with local customs, Bayyinah was treated as a Cisse. When diaspora Black Tijanis were called Cisse rather than American, they became incorporated into the local system of collective care. Having spent extended time in Medina Baye, Bayyinah was expected to be knowledgeable about and responsible for honouring the financial responsibilities and moral obligations modelled by the Cisse *shaykhs*. This was ironic, given that Bayyinah and other diaspora Black disciples, like their African peers, came from economically marginalized backgrounds or received financial assistance from their *shaykhs*. Nonetheless, even if it was a bit of a hardship and even if she was unable to provide the woman with a substantial amount of money, Bayyinah pushed herself to uphold the practices of collective care that came with receiving the esteemed title of Cisse.

### **Conclusion: Tijanis across the Black Muslim Atlantic**

Medina Baye represents a unique site of diasporic exchange. Since the early twentieth century, Medina Baye has attracted Muslims from throughout Africa. Starting in the late twentieth century, Shaykh Hassan, Imam Cheikh and Shaykh Mahy spread word of the Tijani *tariqa* to Black Muslims in the diaspora. Hundreds of African Americans and eventually Black Brits joined the Tijani *tariqa* and journeyed to Medina Baye. Like many African disciples, diaspora Black Tijanis came to Medina Baye at the personal invitation of the Cisse family. These *shaykhs* carved out space for their disciples in

their schools, homes and families. Such material support was part of their broader responsibility as religious leaders of Medina Baye who addressed the material and spiritual needs of the city's residents. Thanks to the financial sponsorship of their *shaykhs*, diaspora Black and African Tijani disciples were able to embark on the shared pursuit of spiritual transformation. The Tijani *tariqa* thus marked fertile grounds on which a counterhegemonic social movement might develop. Challenging the narratives that differentiated and hierarchized the economic hardships facing African and diaspora Black communities impacted by the interconnected legacies of slavery, colonialism and global apartheid, the convergence of diverse African-descended Tijani disciples in Medina Baye held the potential to foster ongoing opportunities for learning and dialogue.

Yet over the years of studying in Medina Baye, diaspora Black disciples such as Kareem encountered some African residents who held misinformed assumptions, expectations and understandings about African Americans and their lives in the USA. The irony aside that Kareem and many other diaspora Black disciples hailed from working-class backgrounds and were sustained by the financial sponsorship of the Cisse *shaykhs*, they were often accosted with the demand 'American, give me money!' This statement seemed to indicate their status as outsiders or *toubabs*. However, it might be better understood as a reflection of the local system of collective care, where those who had resources were expected to share. When Kareem retorted that he was a *talibe* in need, he sought to correct Usman's assumptions about Americans' wealth. Although this momentarily shifted the dynamics of their interaction, it did not spark an in-depth conversation about the realities confronting Black communities in the USA, or foster the space to explore the overlapping experiences of Black people in the USA and African people in rural Medina Baye. Such dialogue was unlikely to unfold during brief and impromptu encounters among diaspora Black and continental African residents who knew little about each other, who engaged each other as they stood in public spaces, or who were not fluent in one another's languages.

Conversations between spouses or among friends who could communicate through a shared language held greater potential. So too did the classrooms at AAIL, where diaspora Black and African students learned together. However, in the case of Kareem, he reported that some of his African classmates were unfamiliar with the transatlantic slave trade and its lasting impact on people of African descent. As they experienced the everyday impacts of structural adjustment and the underdevelopment of Africa, coupled with their exposure to romanticized depictions of life in the USA and Europe, some Africans presumed that diaspora Black Muslims held socio-economic privilege by virtue of their former residence in such countries. As evidenced by the mediation of Kareem's interactions through his Ghanaian friend, language barriers made it difficult for diaspora Black disciples who did not yet have a firm grasp of Wolof to engage fellow residents. Struggling to develop a full understanding of each other's experiences, members of both groups reportedly compared and ranked one another's plight, claiming that each was in a more economically precarious position than the other.

While certain general misunderstandings persisted even though diaspora Black and African residents had ongoing opportunities to engage one another, there were other moments in which the two groups gained better understanding of life in each

other's context. In addition to conversations that African Americans had with African friends and spouses, there were instances when diaspora Black disciples learned about local norms. Kareem, Bayyinah and other diaspora Black disciples observed how the Cisse *shaykhs* spent their own resources to ensure that their disciples could pursue spiritual advancement. They also received the invitation 'American, *kaay lekk* [come eat]!' and observed neighbours of all socio-economic levels offer to share their food. They saw how those who in one instance might be in need could in a separate instance support others. Diaspora Black disciples witnessed how these everyday social practices contributed to a system of collective care that sustained the people of Medina Baye, partially alleviating the effects of poverty and economic marginalization in rural Senegal. These experiences generated within diaspora Black disciples such as Bayyinah a sense of financial responsibility based on new-found understandings of the local economic and social norms. Although diaspora Black disciples may not have been as wealthy as the stereotype of the 'American' might suggest, they nonetheless developed the responsibility to share their resources. In honouring this local norm, diaspora Black disciples became integrated into Medina Baye's system of collective care, thereby transforming from American to Cisse.

Membership within a shared religious and spiritual community – as Muslims of the Tijani *tariqa* – thus altered relationships between Africans and diaspora Black people, which were often overdetermined by misinterpretations of each other's socio-economic privilege. It transformed understandings of economic and social reciprocity between African and diaspora Black Tijanis, whose experiences were interconnected through their intimate, sustained relations as disciples in the Tijani *tariqa*. While language barriers and differences in first-hand experiences meant that analyses of their overlapping experiences were not always realized, their interactions nonetheless revealed another way in which they could relate to one another. Shifting away from the tendency to compare and hierarchize the economic hardships facing African and diaspora Black communities, these newly emerging social relations among diverse groups of Black Muslims pointed to the ways in which Shaykh Ibrahim's branch of the Tijani *tariqa* served as a counterhegemonic social movement that offered new paradigms of social and economic reciprocity to mitigate the impact of shared racialized economic exclusion facing Black Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic.

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