Experiencing Islam: Women’s Accounts of Religious Equality and Inequality in Senegal

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by

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Declaration

This senior honors thesis is submitted for review by the Anthropology Department of Brandeis University for consideration of departmental honors to Nelly Schläfereit in May of 2015. With regard to the above, I declare that this is an original piece of work and that all non-cited writing is my own.

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Introduction

It is early morning and around 5 am, and my light sleep is interrupted by the call to prayer from the nearby mosque: “Alaahu akbaar! Allaahu akbaar!” “God is great” are the words with which the mosque incites Muslims from the neighborhood to engage in the first out of five daily prayers that every Muslim is told to observe. The call to prayer is how I wake up every morning. This same call is also how the majority of people in Senegal start off their day, attending to their first daily duty as believers of the Islamic faith. Today, around 94 percent of the Senegalese population identifies as Muslim and Islam is omnipresent throughout the society, greatly influencing every aspect of it (Ross 2008: 31). Whether one is in the streets or in a Senegalese household the influence that Islam has on everyday life is pervasive.

Two years earlier, I had travelled to Senegal for the first time. Straight out of high school, I spent three months interning at a women’s shelter in Dakar. Some experiences that I had during these three months sparked my interest in Muslim women in Senegal and subsequently influenced my decision to write this thesis. Some of the scenes that I remember vividly from my first experience in Senegal were the many naming ceremonies that I had attended at La Maison Rose, the organization that I interned for. They would happen exactly a week after the birth of a new child, and we had quite a lot of births given the high incidence of pregnant women that were sheltered by the organization. Everyone in the community would get dressed up, the women would throw over a headscarf, including myself, and we would gather in the courtyard. The Imam\(^1\) of the neighborhood would come along with a group of elderly men, leading the gathering in prayer and whispering the name of the newborn that the parents had chosen into the child’s ear. The men included in the gathering would sit in a small circle around the Imam, and the

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\(^1\) Local religious leader
women would sit around that circle. After the religious ceremony, the women would serve the *lakh* that Marie had prepared, a traditional dish traditionally served at every naming ceremony. People would socialize while indulging in this delicious meal, made of millet and milk curd.

Now that I think back to these experiences, the naming ceremonies revealed aspects of the position that Muslim Senegalese women hold in the religious sphere, such as the equalities and inequalities that they experience on a daily basis, which is the focus of this research project. In the summer of 2013, I returned to Senegal to work on a project that involved students of Qur’anic schools, with whom I worked for two months. It was during this time that I started to spend more time trying to learn about Senegalese Islam, more particularly the role that women played in the religious sphere. The Islam that I experienced in Senegal, both during my first and my second stay, was very different from what I had been taught to believe. I am a German national, educated in Switzerland and the United States, and the picture that I had painted of Islam for myself, before travelling to Senegal, had largely been influenced by the media depiction of the faith.

The picture that the media painted of Islam (and continues to paint today), especially with regards to Muslim women, was mostly that of a barbaric religion, oppressing women who had no rights under its laws. Lila Abu-Lughod discusses this view that the West typically presents of Islam in her book titled *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*: “Muslims are presented as a special and threatening culture – the most homogenized and the most troubling of the Rest. Muslim women, in this new common sense, symbolize just how alien this culture is” (Abu-Lughod 2013: 6). The West has a long history of portraying Muslim civilizations through an Orientalist lens. Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* discusses and criticizes this lens through which Muslim civilizations are viewed as foreign and backward compared to typically Western ideals.
According to Said’s argument, the West essentializes Muslim societies, portraying them as underdeveloped and static, fabricating a picture of an oriental culture that can be studied and reproduced. The position of Muslim women is commonly used to prove this “backwardness” of Muslim societies, being portrayed as one of marginalization and oppression. Lila Abu-Lughod challenges this viewpoint in her book, condemning the Western narrative of “oppressed Muslim women” and highlighting the complexities of the lives of Muslim women in Egypt that she has worked with. She recounts the reaction of an Egyptian woman after telling her about the book she was planning to write about how the West believes that Muslim women are oppressed because of Islam. The Egyptian woman was shocked to hear this and she immediately blamed any oppression on the government, firmly stating that Islam had nothing to do with it. This encounter between Abu-Lughod and the Egyptian woman perfectly illustrates the disconnection between different viewpoints on this topic. In addition to her work, there have been numerous anthropologists who have studied the experiences of Muslim women around the world, challenging both the notions that Muslim women’s lives are homogenous and that they are oppressed by their religion. Christian Coulon writes about a similar phenomenon, arguing that women are often represented as marginal within Islam and that there is an automatic assumption by many non-Muslims that women are hardly involved in the religious sphere (Coulon 1988:113). These assumptions completely disregard the diversity of women’s experiences throughout the Muslim world.

The diverse narratives of Muslim women are not easy to convey. And yet, in this paper, I will attempt to highlight the various ways in which Senegalese women interact with Islam and experience the religion. There are many different branches as well as schools of thought within Islam, not all of which grant the same position and roles to women or accord them the same
freedoms. This diversity of Muslim women’s interactions with Islam often seems to be overlooked.

I traveled to Senegal during the summer of 2014 to conduct fieldwork for this thesis. I lived in Dakar, Senegal’s capital for seven weeks, during which I conducted interviews with several women. My goal was to interview women who were part of different Sufi orders and had different experiences in terms of their involvement in the religious sphere. I also attempted to choose subjects from different social classes, some of them more educated than others. Although I did not originally plan on interviewing men, I was presented with a few opportunities to receive men’s opinions on the subject as well, which I gladly took.

Although I interviewed around twenty women for this project, I found it difficult to engage some of them on the subject of their own experiences with Islam and their position in their own religious community. Many of the women I interviewed, especially the ones who had received less education, found it difficult to talk about this subject, mainly because they told me that they did not have anything to say or that they did not know enough about the subject. However, I also had some very thought-provoking interviews that gave me a little bit more insight into the world of Senegalese Muslim women and how they position themselves in “the narrative of the Muslim woman”.

The research that I have done is thus primarily based on individual interviews I conducted with Senegalese Muslim women as well as a few men. The women that I had the pleasure to interview did not know each other and were from very different communities. However, they all lived in the capital of Dakar at the time of the interview. They were all part of different Sufi brotherhoods (a term that I explain in the first chapter), although many of them did not see their allegiance to a specific brotherhood as defining their experiences. Most of the
women I interviewed were members of a branch of the Tijaniyya and the Mouride, two of the 
most prominent brotherhoods in the country.

During the interviews I conducted in Senegal during the summer of 2014, the word 
“equality” (égalité) came up over and over again. As my interviewees were using it in different 
contexts in our discussions, I became increasingly interested in the term itself, what they meant 
by it and how they used it. From my upbringing in Switzerland, I had been conditioned to think 
about equality – more specifically equality between men and women – as both sides being 
treated fairly and being given the same opportunities in all aspects of social life. It is with this 
conception that I went to Senegal to interview women about how they viewed their position and 
role in the religious sphere. As I had more and more conversations with Senegalese women, I 
began to wonder if the word equality could have different meanings to them than it did to me. 
During many of the conversations I had with different women we talked about the differences 
that men and women might experience as part of their participation in Islam.

One of the aspects that all of the women I spoke to were very firm about was that 
inherently, Islam is an equal religion, promoting equality for both men and women. However, 
throughout these same conversations, some of my informants would also point out some 
inequalities that they experienced in religious settings as well as in daily life. According to them, 
these experiences countered the ideologies brought forth by the teachings of the Qur’an. 
Throughout this paper I will try to reconcile the aspects of religious ideologies and lived 
experiences that did not always match up as described by my informants. For the purpose of 
clarity, let me briefly establish how I will refer to these two aspects throughout this paper. The 
first one is the “pure” form of Islam as established by the main Islamic texts such as the Qur’an. 
Even though this “pure” form of the religion might be interpreted differently by different
Muslims, I will refer to this sphere of the religion as religious ideologies or the spiritual sphere. As the term implies, this aspect is mainly concerned with the spiritual realm of Islam, namely each individual’s interior relationship with God and the ideologies that they see in the religion. The other aspect of the religion refers to lived experiences and the exterior manifestations of the religion in daily life. I will refer to this aspect as lived religious experiences or the quotidian sphere, emphasizing the way in which women experience the religion in the context of daily life. Although there are some differences to be established between experiences directly linked to Islam, such as religious ceremonies, and daily life in general, they will both be included in this sphere because of Islam’s indirect influence on every aspect of daily life.

Focusing on the equalities and inequalities that my informants spoke about, I will argue in this thesis that Muslim Senegalese women increasingly use Islam, and the equality that they see embedded in the religious ideologies, as a way to uphold their equal position in lived religious experiences and daily life, which has been a marginalized one in the past. They thus find different avenues of participation in quotidian life, including using faith as a tool to justify the rights that they should have according to their religious ideologies. Although women have already received extensive rights through secular laws such as the Senegalese Parity Act, they argue that it is important to ground these rights in the religious ideologies, taking into consideration the influence of the religious realm on quotidian life.

I will start this paper by establishing the historical framework of Islam in Senegal and discuss some of the specificities that characterize it. I then move on to discuss religious equality as it can be attained on a spiritual level in Islam. After detailing the inequalities that my informants described in their lived religious experiences, I conclude by offering some analysis of how to reconcile the two narratives, that of theoretical religious equality and that of experienced
religious inequalities. Through this analysis I hope to provide some insight into the complexities of Senegalese Muslim women’s lives, the trade-offs they face on a daily basis and their use of Islam as a tool to further assert themselves as equal to men in religious aspects of daily life.

Anthropologists have long been interested in the position of Muslim women both on an ideological level and “on the ground” and the existing literature written on this subject has considerably influenced my way of thinking about the issue as well as my research. Anthropologists have also studied the position of Muslim women in many parts of the world. While I will focus mostly on the anthropological literature on Muslim women in Africa, let me briefly give an overview of the main works of literature that have allowed me to ground my research in arguments that anthropologists have already made.

Lila Abu-Lughod’s work on Muslim women in Egypt attuned me to stereotypical Western perspectives on Muslim women and gave me the tools to ground the experience of my subjects within this common narrative. In her book (2013) she attempts to deconstruct the portrayal of women as oppressed victims and emphasizes the importance of articulating the diversity of Muslim women’s narratives. She suggests that the hardships that women experience are often equated to gender inequalities and even oppression and that these assumptions do not adequately describe the whole story of Muslim women’s experiences: “Indeed, it seems to me that we have to work hard at recognizing and respecting differences – but as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires” (2013: 43). Even though they might experience inequalities in relation to men, women’s stories are much more complex than a dichotomy between equal and unequal. Abu-Lughod’s argument aligns with the diversity of women’s narratives that I found during my interviews in Senegal. Similar to the Egyptian women that Abu-Lughod studied, Senegalese
Muslim women typically do not describe their experiences as one of oppression by Islam. The inequalities that they highlighted were much more nuanced and were not only associated with religion.

Abu-Lughod’s earlier work among Bedouin women in Egypt also explored how Islam can pervade daily life in a particular community without it being the only influence on women’s position and experience. Her book *Writing Women’s World: Bedouin Stories* (2008) narrates stories of Bedouin women, highlighting their experiences through different aspects of social life under the structure of patrilineality. The stories that Abu-Lughod tells underline mediums through which women act in a Muslim society that puts men into the foreground: “The Awlad ‘Ali are patrilineal, but reckoning descent, tribal affiliations, and inheritance through the male line does not foreclose women’s opportunities or desires to shape their own lives or those of their sons and daughters, or to oppose the decisions of their fathers” (2008: 19). She highlights the complexities represented by instances of women’s resistance, especially when they do not directly oppose power structures but instead work from within the system.

Saba Mahmood (2005) also discusses female agency, concentrating on different avenues through which women are able to involve themselves in the religious aspects of quotidian life. She gives the reader insight into the involvement of women in the piety movement in Egypt, where her research was based. Her work is instrumental in grounding the notion of female agency as a fluid term, not necessarily fixed to one definition but rather taking various forms of expression. Similar to Abu Lughod, Mahmood proposes that women find many ways of being active agents in a sphere that has historically excluded them. However, she does not imply that involvement in the piety movement is a way to deconstruct the male-dominated public religious life, but rather that women have used it as a way to increasingly involve themselves in religious
activities, while maintaining a balance between the moral codes that can be transgressed and those that are mandatory: “While conceding that one of the effects of the mosque participants’ pursuit of piety is the destabilization of certain norms of male kin authority, I want to argue that attention to the terms and concepts deployed by women in these struggles directs us to analytical questions that are closed off by an undue emphasis on resistance” (Mahmood 2005: 175). While women become active participants in the piety movement the Egyptian women that Mahmood writes about are not actually undermining the male domination still at the forefront of the movement. They are rather acting within this framework of male domination, embracing certain inequalities, such as exclusion from public ceremonies, while promoting the agenda of the movement.

My own research in Senegal did not actually align with Mahmood’s argument as much as it did with that of Adeline Masquelier, which describes a more direct wish to resist the inequalities that women encountered in lived religious experiences. Masquelier’s book *Women and Islamic Revival in a West African Town* (2009) studies a small community of Muslims in a town in Niger that is experiencing an Islamic revival. Through the story of a Sufi preacher who has been on a mission to reform Muslim traditions in this town, she describes the space this movement has provided for women to redefine their impact, place and role in the society. Similarly to what my research in Senegal shows, Masquelier discusses ways in which Sufism can provide women with a broader space for influence and active participation in public religious life. She narrates how women have had to redefine Islam for themselves, making sense of it as a religion but also as a way of life that influences all aspects of their society. Masquelier argues that “In the process of contesting the rules and restrictions imposed on them, ignoring them, or, alternatively, embracing them through new comportment and consumption practices, they
[Muslim women in Dogondoutchi] have devised multiple ways of being Muslims” (2009: xxii). In a similar way, my informants in Senegal described very different ways to navigate the social order influenced by the religion of Islam, some of them more directly challenging the male domination of public religious spheres such as the mosque, while others more subtly attempted to find their realms of influence within the structure, not directly resisting its male domination.

Finally, Rebecca Popenoe (2004) discusses the place of Islam in daily life of the Azawagh community in Niger, giving the reader insights into how gender intertwines with Islamic influences. While her work mostly focuses on ideas of beauty in the Azawagh community, she also situates the complex of influences on gendered practices in communities in West Africa, looking not only at Islam but also the intricate web of influences that construct women’s daily experience and practices. As I describe at the beginning of this paper, Islam is an omnipresent aspect of Senegalese culture in both the public and the private sphere, making it difficult to single it out as a distinct influence considering the incorporation of Islamic practices into every aspect of daily life. Popenoe’s work emphasizes the pervasiveness of Islam in quotidian life: “Islam’s linking of faith and salvation of the body makes it impossible for practicing Muslims to allow religion to become a matter of ‘mere’ belief, set apart from everyday life” (2004: 59). The way in which the religion of Islam shapes the actions and rhythm of life of practicing Muslims thus strongly influences the social order of Muslim communities, while also not being the only determining factor. Popenoe’s work has sensitized me to not attribute all practices to the religion, while also not forgetting its undeniable presence both in the private and the public sphere.

These anthropologists whose work I have outlined briefly, pulling out their main arguments relevant to my own work have not only made significant contributions to the scholarly...
literature about Muslim women’s experiences in Africa, but they have also helped me in situating the narratives that I heard in Senegal, making parallels and drawing comparisons. In subsequent chapters, I will repeatedly reference all of these scholarly works, putting them into conversation with my own research in more detailed and specific ways. In addition to the anthropologists that I have just mentioned there are also a few other scholars who have focused on Senegalese women and Islam, and whose work I will briefly mention. Although some of these works do not come from the discipline of anthropology, they have given me much insight into some of the scholarship that already existed on Muslim women in Senegal before I started my research.

Christian Coulon (1988), a political scientist who has also received some training in anthropology, articulates the idea of gender equality in the spiritual sphere of Islam in his work. He argues that the spiritual equality that exists in Islam gives women avenues of greater involvement in the religious sphere than men, something that is particular to the Islam practiced in Senegal. By looking at women who have attained the status of sainthood, or who are greatly worshiped in Senegalese society, he argues that women are able to break through the typical notion that they are not equal to men, and that there have been Senegalese women who have influenced religious experiences on the ground in substantial ways. In my own research, I have been able to use Coulon’s argument to ground my fieldwork, situating women’s opinions in relation to his argument.

Barbara Callaway and Lucy Creevey, two political scientists, have also greatly contributed to my understanding of the position Muslim women hold in Senegal. In their book *Islam – Women, Religion & Politics in West Africa* (1994) they examine the inclusion of women in both Senegalese and Nigerian society. While analyzing this position, they emphasize the role
that Islam plays in determining the place that women occupy in both of these societies, permeating every aspect of daily life, similar to what Popenoe describes in Niger. Callaway and Creevey highlight the complexities that come with understanding what the position of women is and how it came to be, acknowledging different spheres of influence such as religion, but also pre-Islamic traditions and colonialism.

While there are many more scholars that have contributed to the literature on the subject of women’s roles in Islam in Africa and elsewhere, I have noted the ones that have influenced my work and my research the most. This literature has grounded my own fieldwork, using theoretical concepts from recognized anthropologists and their ethnographic examples from other Muslim communities to examine how Muslim women in Senegal experience the religion. I will now move onto presenting my own research, first establishing a historical framework in which to place the experiences of Senegalese women.
Chapter 1

A historical framework

I walk through the streets of Dakar, the hot midday sun burning on my face. It is Friday, and as I walk down the street to the boutique to get a bottle of cold juice, I am reminded that it will be closed at this time. Around me, I observe the men from the neighborhood, young and old, making their way to the Friday prayer. They have put on their nicest outfit and are carrying their prayer mats, some of them on top of their heads to protect themselves from the burning sun, to the weekly communal prayer at the mosque. I turn around to make my way back to my room, disappointed that I will not be able to buy the refreshing juice that I had hoped for. The boutique will not open again until later in the afternoon, when the prayer will be over and everyone will have returned to his or her occupation. But for the time being, life stops, and every activity is put on hold, even in the capital of city, Dakar.

During my visits to Senegal, Islam was an omnipresent aspect of social life, affecting both the private and the public sphere. There were constant reminders that Senegal was a majority Muslim country, and that the religion had become one of the main identifiers of Senegalese society. Let me examine for a moment how the religion arrived in the region that is now Senegal and how it has come to influence its society as much as we can see today.

A historical account of the rise of Islam in Senegal

The presence of Islam in the Western part of Africa goes back all the way to the eleventh century. Over time, the religion has taken deep roots in the society, and the two have become increasingly intertwined, characterizing the Senegal of today. Rebecca Popenoe has described the extent to which Islam becomes incorporated into the quotidian life of society, not only
affecting the religious realm. “It has often been noted that Islam is a religion that seamlessly links faith and social life, belief and practice. While this could be said to be true of certain forms of the other major monotheisms also, Islam’s linking of faith and salvation to the body makes it impossible for a practicing Muslim to allow religion to become a matter of ‘mere’ belief, set apart from everyday life” (Popenoe 2004: 59). In a similar way, the practices and beliefs I encountered in Senegal, whether directly linked to the religious sphere or not, were characterized by a complex set of influences.

It is widely believed that the rise of Islam in the territory that is now known as Senegal goes back to the densely populated kingdom of Tekrur, situated in the middle Senegal river valley and one of the oldest and most prominent of Senegal’s pre-colonial African states. The Tekrur state was prominent in the region and it prospered from trans-Saharan trade between North and West Africa, involving goods like gold, slaves, cowries, salt and weapons (Gellar 1982: 2). It was the ruler of the Tekrur state, War Jabi, a member of the Tukulor ethnic group, who first came under the influence of Muslim traders and missionaries from North Africa and eventually converted to Islam himself. Shortly after his conversion, the majority of the Tukulor people followed the example of their ruler and also converted to Islam. The Tukulor thus became the first major Senegalese ethnic group to embrace Islam as their dominant faith. In fact, “over the years, Tekrur became a training ground for Muslim clerics and missionaries operating throughout the area of modern Senegal and West Africa” (Gellar 1982: 2).

During the thirteenth century, the Tekrur state became part of the great Mandinka Mali empire, while at the same time the Wolof were unified under the rule of Ndiadiane N’Diaye. He was the one who conquered the Wolof states of Walo, Cayor and Baol and united all of these states to form the Djolof Empire at the end of the century. This empire eventually came to
include the kingdoms of Sine and Saloum, now encompassing most of the major ethnic groups of contemporary Senegal (Gellar 1982: 2). Although this empire was also exposed to Muslim traders as well as clerics and court advisors, the Djolof resisted Islamization and most of their leaders remained attached to their traditional religious practices. The empire eventually dissolved in the sixteenth century, when the states of Baol, Cayor, Walo, Sine and Saloum broke off to establish their own independent kingdoms (Gellar 1982: 4). In the fifteenth century the region of West Africa came into contact with Europeans for the first time and the people of Senegal began to trade with the Portuguese. For the next century the Senegambia region was the largest supplier of slaves to Europe. The expansion and intensification of the Atlantic slave trade during the seventeenth century gave rise to a popular but mostly unsuccessful movement led by Muslim clerics and mostly involving peasants who were the main victims of slave raids, revolting against the tyranny of the slave-trading traditional aristocracy that was not Muslim. The Muslim clerics sought to gain popularity among the population by resisting against the aristocracy that had strong links to the colonial powers (Gellar 1982: 6).

Even though this first movement led by Muslim clerics did not prove successful, it was only a century later that the Senegambian region experienced the next militant Islamic revival. While the British and French were competing over control in the region, eventually resulting in the partition of the territory into The British colony of the Gambia and the French colony of Senegal in the nineteenth century, a group of Tukulor marabouts\(^2\) led a revolution that overthrew the Diananké dynasty. They established a theocratic oligarchy and started to send missionaries throughout the territory of Senegal, developing closer ties with other Islamic movements in West Africa. Islam thus became more and more widespread throughout the region as Tukulor clerics

\(^2\) Common term in Senegal referring to Muslim clerics and leaders
attempted to overturn pagan rulers and create Muslim theocratic states (Gellar 1982: 6). Thus, even though Islam was first introduced to the region of Senegal in the eleventh century, it remained the religion of the minority there until well into the nineteenth century, around the same time that the French officially colonized the territory.

Khady, an elderly woman who agreed to be one of my informants for my research project, remembered the end of the colonial period. She was convinced that the success of Islam was deeply rooted in the colonial history that the region of Senegal experienced. She said that when they established the French colony of Senegal, colonials effectively dismantled the kingdoms into which the Senegalese region had been divided. The local populations thus lost their rulers and had nobody else to turn to but the Muslim clerics that were gaining more and more power. “The Muslim leaders at the time played a very important role in resisting colonialism, and by this gained a lot of support from the population,” Khady related. In fact, scholars have argued that the popularization of Islam is directly linked to the rise of colonialism in the region: “In this period the power of the ruling classes was being directly undermined by the French invaders, and conversion to Islam was at least in part a reaction to this loss of status and authority” (Callaway and Creevey 1994: 21). The organization of Muslims across the region played a crucial role in resistance movements against the colonial powers, and there are a few Senegalese religious leaders that remain famous to this day for their resistance and fights against colonialism. These anti-colonial movements also account for the popularity that Islam increasingly gained among the population of the region. Before I am able to discuss some of these accounts, it makes sense to establish the ways in which Senegalese Islam is structured and practiced.
Sufism – the core of Islam in Senegal

The Islam practiced in Senegal has been strongly influenced by Sufism, which has become the dominant kind of Islam practiced in the region. The term “Sufism” refers to mystical and esoteric dimensions of the religion, and it has some more specific characteristics to it that Sufis believe and engage in. Sufism emphasizes the individual’s relationship with God and Sufis seek closeness to God by engaging in practices that highlight their devotion in addition to following the five pillars of Islam like other Muslims: “the shahada (witnessing God’s oneness and the prophetic stature of Muhammad), salah (praying five times a day), zakah (giving alms), sawm (fasting during the month of Ramadan), and hajj (making a pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are able)” (Ross 2008: 34). These five pillars are at the core of manifesting one’s submission to God for any Muslim around the world. However, for Sufis, there is an added emphasis on one’s personal relationship with God, which comes with certain additional religious practices that are used by Sufis around the world. Some of the more widespread practices are those of dhikr (remembering God by reciting his names), sama’ (reciting poems and singing songs of praise), and hadrah (moving the body) (2008: 34). They carry the power of bringing the believer closer to God and His Divine power and are often practiced communally.

Muslims practicing this form of Islam, referred to as Sufis, are usually organized in a distinct way, in the form of brotherhoods. These organizations are also referred to as tariqahs, literally meaning “way,” a term that originally referred to the path leading to closeness with God but over time has become synonymous with Sufi brotherhoods or orders. In Senegal as well, Sufi Islam is marked by distinct orders that have become established in the region over time and still have extensive spheres of influence in Senegal today. It is during the rise of colonialism in the region that Sufi orders were turned into mass movements by the few Muslim elites that were
practicing Sufism at the time. “Today virtually all Muslims in Senegal claim an affiliation to one Sufi order or another. Senegal’s Sufi orders are thus among the principal institutions of its civil society” (Ross 2008: 34). The Senegalese Sufi orders have become an important structure of the society and one can feel their presence and influence up to this day.

Although there are different Sufi orders in Senegal, they all share similar structures of organization, characterized by a hierarchical leadership system. At the head of each order is usually the caliph, who has complete power over the whole brotherhood. The position of caliph is inherited though direct descendants of the founder of each respective order and caliphs are thought to be blessed by divine grace from God directly, also referred to as barakah, inherited paternally from caliph to caliph. Below the caliph are numerous sheikhs, meaning “elders,” who are responsible for smaller divisions of the order. Sometimes these sheikhs are also referred to as marabouts. The role of sheikh is also inheritable through the father, keeping the lineage of important religious leaders within certain families. Finally, the masses of the population are referred to as taalibes, applying to both male and female students and seekers of the Sufi way. Every taalibe devotes him or herself to a specific sheikh, who is in charge of leading his student on the right path (Ross 2008: 34).

The Sufi tradition greatly emphasizes the relationship between the sheikh and the taalibe. The sheikh guides his student and even helps him or her out in times of need, and the taalibe provides his or her services to the religious leader. There is also a monetary relationship involved, the taalibe being expected to provide gifts and donations to his or her leader, while the sheikh is supposed to be generous to all of his students and followers. A Mouride sheikh is ofr instance generally expected to help his need disciples access land, get a wife, secure a good position in the civil service, acquire bank loans, etc (Babou 2007: 94). This generosity is most
often expressed Young Senegalese children are initiated into this system of the brotherhoods at a very young age and the relationship between a *sheikh* and his *taalibe* is lifelong. A child is usually first initiated into this relationship by attending the Qur’anic school affiliated with his or her *sheikh* where he or she receives the bases of the religious education that every Muslim must have (Ross 2008: 35).

Now that I have established the specificities that lie behind the structures of Senegalese Islam, let me quickly talk about the main brotherhoods that exist in Senegal, in order to provide some information to reference the stories that my informants have provided and that will appear throughout this thesis. I interviewed women who were for the most part members of one of these brotherhoods, although a few did not identify with one specific order, and although their belonging to a specific order did not characterize their opinion regarding gender equality, the social structures that brotherhoods provide are important to understand in the Senegalese Muslim context.

There are four main brotherhoods in Senegal, the Qadiriyya, the Tijaniyya, the Mourides, and the Layène. The Quadiriyya is Senegal’s oldest Sufi order and it was first introduced to the region by Mauritanian teachers in the nineteenth century and, today, an estimated 10 percent of Muslims in Senegal are part of this Sufi order. The Tijaniyya order was originally founded in Morocco and became very influential in Senegal, both socially and politically, in the middle of the nineteenth century, during the rise of colonialism. In fact, many of the Muslim clerics that fought against French colonials during that time were members of this order. Today, it is the biggest order in Senegal, with almost 50 percent of Senegalese Muslims (about 5 million people) being members of this brotherhood, itself subdivided into numerous branches that function independently from one another. The Mouride brotherhood is by far the most studied Sufi order
of Senegal. It was founded by Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké (1853-1927), a Senegalese man. The Mouride brotherhood is a homegrown order and about 3 million of Senegalese Muslims are members of this order. The Mouride brotherhood is not divided into separate branches like the other orders, maintaining a hierarchical and centralized structure with the caliph general, a grandson of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, as the primary leader residing in Touba, the holy city of the Mourides established by its founder. Finally, the Layène is the smallest of all Sufi orders in Senegal with only around 30,000 followers. It is also homegrown, founded by Mouhammadou Limamou Laye (1844-1909) and its followers are primarily people from the Lebu ethnic group (Ross 2008: 35-36).

These four Sufi orders permeate the social and religious web of Senegalese society and affect many different aspects of everyday life in the country. They do not only have strong religious influences on the Senegalese population, but they have also affected the political life in Senegal throughout the years, even though Senegal is formally a secular state. The religious families that are at the top of the hierarchical leadership that is characteristic of all of these orders have a big influence on the choices their followers make, including secular activities such as voting. The ties between the secular government and the religious families that assume leadership of the Sufi brotherhoods thus remain close, often working hand in hand.

One of the women who agreed to an interview for my research topic mentioned this close relationship that the government must maintain with the different religious families. I was lucky that the president of an organization in Dakar that I had interned with in 2011 was able to connect me with Mrs. Sow Sidibé. A Minister in charge of human rights and peace and advisor to the President, she was the first woman in her country to run in the presidential elections (in
She is also an advocate of women’s rights in Senegal and has lobbied for the parity law in the country.

I cleared security to enter the Présidence de le République du Sénégal, the government building where I had an appointment to interview Mrs. Sow Sidibé. After finding my way to her office, I was introduced to a woman, about sixty years old, carefully dressed in a colorful *boubou*[^3] kindly welcoming me with a smile. Mrs. Sow Sidibé said that she was a pious Muslim woman, but she did not disclose allegiance to a specific Sufi order, emphasizing her excellent relationship with all of them given her government position. She also articulated the important role religious institutions and brotherhoods play in Senegalese society:

I have excellent relations with all of the religious families, and I feel integrated in each one of them, may they be Mourides, Tijaniyya or Layène. When they hold religious activities and events, I participate in them. I think that these families actually play a fundamental role within our society because Senegalese people believe the religious authorities. When the authorities say to do something, people will do it, and when they say not to do something, people will not do it. When I am trying to get something accomplished, or try to ease a conflict, it is in my best interest to call upon the religious leaders of the brotherhoods to ask for their help and lead their followers in good decisions.

Mrs. Sow Sidibé’s account speaks to the influence that religious authorities of all of these brotherhoods have over the Senegalese population. It also highlights the extent to which the religious sphere is subtly incorporated into many aspects of Senegalese society, including the formally secular government.

When we look at the position that Senegalese women hold in the religious sphere, it is equally essential to look at the way that Sufi Islam has permeated Senegalese society, spreading its influence on every level. As scholars such as Coulon point out, it is among Sufi brotherhoods like the ones found in Senegal or in popular Sufism that women make their presence and

[^3]: Dress commonly worn in Senegal and throughout West Africa
involvement most strongly felt in the religious sphere, especially by way of the personal relationship between the sheikh and the taalibe (Coulon 1988:116). I will come back to this thought in the next chapter in more detail but it is important to grasp the basic concepts of Sufism and its roots in the region in order to understand the position and role that Senegalese Muslim women play in the religious sphere.

Here, I have attempted to briefly outline the most important aspects of Senegalese Islam in rooting it in its history with the hope to connect it to my informants’ accounts that will frequently reference back to some part of Islamic history throughout my thesis. This brief history is also a useful tool with which we are able to understand more deeply some of the women’s experiences
Chapter 2

“We are all equal before God”

Trying to explore notions of equality among Senegalese Muslim women highlighted the diversity of experiences that different women in Senegal had. Furthermore, equality between men and women in the religious realm can be studied and examined through different lenses, such as spiritual equality or access to religious leadership. In order to understand some of the patterns of religious equality between men and women, I think it is important to consider religious ideologies of equality. In other words, to try to understand equality as perceived by Senegalese Muslim women in lived religious experiences, I start looking at notions of equality in the context of text-based religious ideologies.

Islam and spiritual equality

Indeed the *Muslim* men and the *Muslim* women, the faithful men and the faithful women, the obedient men and the obedient women, the truthful men and the truthful women, the patient men and the patient women, the humble men and the humble women, the charitable men and the charitable women, the men who fast and the women who fast, the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, the men who remember Allah greatly and the women who remember [Allah greatly] – Allah holds in store for them forgiveness and a great reward (Qur’an 33:35).

The above verse from the Qur’an reflects the same kind of spiritual equality, based on religious ideologies that most of my informants during my fieldwork in Dakar identified with. When talking about religion in relation to gender, more specifically gender equality, most Muslims in Senegal will tell you that Islam is inherently an equal religion that does not discriminate on the basis of gender. Spiritually speaking, women and men alike are seen as the same by God, as both are considered equal believers of the faith and have to submit to God’s will in the same way. The above verse from the Qur’an lays down equal expectations for both female and male Muslims.
Leila Ahmed (1992), a scholar of Islam whose work is primarily based in Egypt points out that the spiritually egalitarian conception of gender found in the Qur’an does not mean that men and women experience equality on the ground, whether in religious contexts or simply in daily life. The marriage structure dictated by Islam, for instance, shows that although women and men are equal on a spiritual level, the Qur’an attributes very different roles and rights to men and women. She argues that while there exists an egalitarian aspect of Islam on the spiritual level, the roles that women typically occupy in lived religious experiences (which I will explore in the next chapter) are most often based on a reading of the Qur’an that disregards this aspect, merely focusing on the worldly relationship between men and women (1992: 65). My informant Khady attempted to clarify this complex discussion of equality that Ahmed examines.

According to the Qur’an men and women are all equal before God. But the Qur’an also suggests that they are not equal before the law. A woman needs to pray as much as a man, they have the same obligations before God and they have the same principles. But the Qur’an also suggests that women need to be protected by men, whether it be the father, the brother, the husband, or Muslim men from the general community. This protection indicates a hierarchy and it represents an inequality. Under this protection, men have authority over women. For example you need testimony of two women to equal the testimony of one man. There is a whole system embedded in the concept of men protecting women that comes with a whole array of inequalities.

Khady’s explanation differentiates between the spiritual equality she reads in the Qur’an and the inequality that women face in their lives outside of spirituality. This complex understanding of equality found in the Qur’an highlights the intricacy of understanding and analyzing Muslim women’s narratives.

Many of the women I interviewed during my fieldwork had a tendency to focus on spiritual equality, emphasizing the egalitarian aspect of the religion. Ahmed points out that “the unmistakable presence of an ethical egalitarianism explains why Muslim women frequently insist, often inexplicably to non-Muslims, that Islam is not sexist” (Ahmed 1992: 66). Women
thus tend to highlight the equality that they see within religious ideologies having a spiritual aspect, rather than pointing out the lived inequalities that they experience.

The trend that Ahmed expresses was generally reflected in the interviews I conducted. Amsatou Sow Sidibé, one of my informants, was not the only Senegalese woman who affirmed that the Qur’an, which in Islam represents the word of God as it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, addresses both men and women as equal human beings. She had been raised a Muslim, practiced the religion her whole life and believed what she had been taught: “When looking at the Arabic text, the Qur’an actually addresses both men and women believers by calling upon them: al-muslimuun wa-l muslimaat (the Arabic terms of male Muslims and female Muslims respectively), therefore recognizing both men and women at the same time, asking them to follow the same principles and to fulfill the same obligations towards God.” Mrs. Sow Sidibé further explained that the parity that is clearly visible in the most sacred text of the religion is a clear indication to her that the religion regards both women and men as equal, looking at both as believers of the faith and submitters to God.

Other Muslim scholars, such as Asghar Ali Engineer, contrary to Ahmed, have supported the claim that Islam is inherently a promoter of women’s rights, and that, if interpreted in a certain way, one can read this message through every verse in the Qur’an. Ali Engineer, an Indian Islamic scholar, was trained in Qur’anic commentary, its interpretation as well as Islamic jurisprudence. He focused a great deal of his work on the rights of women in Islam. For instance, he discusses the different ways the Qur’an can be read. He suggests that it is a matter of interpretation and that the Qur’anic verses that address the status of women in relation to men could be interpreted in two ways, either advocating equality or not (Ali Engineer 1992: 42). Through the different positions that scholars have taken on this discussion, it becomes more and
more clear that there is no right or wrong answer. The scriptures of Islam have been and will continue to be interpreted by a variety of people, some of them advocating the equality of men and women and some of them countering this position. Scholars have not been able to find a unanimous answer in the existing scholarship on women’s position in Islam. I will now focus on the opinions that my informants have voiced, putting these into dialogue with the existing literature.

Lamine, one of my male informants, seemed to have a similar vision about equality of men and women before God as my female informants. He was a relatively young man, about thirty years old and a religious teacher, running a dahira in a neighborhood in downtown Dakar. He said: “God has created us all and the only difference is really physical. We are all human beings and in prayer, we all do the same thing. The physical is different, but there is no difference inside, within the heart.” Lamine made it clear numerous times throughout our conversation that, in front of God, all human beings were the same. The differentiation that he made between the inside and the outside, or the heart and the physical body, was particularly fascinating to me. According to him, attaining purity and goodness of the heart should be every Muslim’s primary goal, whether male or female: “The Qur’an mentions that the heart and its perfection go through the whole body. Every Muslim thus has to purify their heart and if they do that, then they are able to purify their body and most importantly their spirit.” Lamine was not the only informant who brought up this dichotomy. Many of my informants, when talking about the spiritual experiences of Islam, or every human’s personal relationship with God, as well as the position of women before God, would mention the importance of the “inner” or the heart. Many of my interviewees agreed that the inside of a human being – his or her intentions and values, rather than actions – were what interested God the most. They also agreed on the fact that
this inner self was the same in both men and women and that therefore, before God, both men and women were indeed equal.

When I asked my informants to define the qualities and values that Muslim women must have, some of them insisted on talking about the values and qualities Muslims overall must have, as they said these were essentially the same for both women and men. One of my interviewees, Fatou, put the emphasis on the heart when talking about the inherent values every Muslim should have. She argued that the quality of the heart was for her maybe even more important than following Muslim laws and recommendations, as every act needed to be accompanied by good will. She pointed out that if you prayed but did so without your whole essence, it did not mean anything. In her eyes, therefore, people who followed the rules of Islam such as the five pillars simply because they had to were not real Muslims because they did not do it with inner conviction. Janet McIntosh describes similar understandings among Malindi’s Swahili in Kenya in her book *The Edge of Islam* (2009). As her fieldwork reveals, the Swahili, similar to what my informant Fatou describes, put an emphasis on the intention behind every religious act, which they refer to as *nia*: “In Malindi many Swahili believe that anyone can go through the motions of prayer or fasting, but the *nia* behind an act is a, or perhaps the critical factor that makes it pious. The supplicant must wholeheartedly intend, during prayer and at other moments, to subordinate his or her will to God” (McIntosh 2009: 136). McIntosh’s observations among the Swahili emphasize the importance of the interior involvement in religious activities, not only engaging physically, but also involving one’s inner life.

Coming back to the Senegalese context, the necessity to involve one’s intentions into religious activities was applicable to both men as well as to women, as the inner self or the heart is the same regardless of gender. The inner qualities of a person, as Fatou pointed out, would be
necessary to be a good Muslim and daily manifestations of worship and submission to God –
including being open, generous and tolerant, but also following the five pillars – are also part of
the equation.

**Sufism – special circumstances for gender equality?**

Until now I have explored the subject of spiritual equality through a more general understanding
of Islam, reflecting an array of perceptions as to whether women and men are considered equal
in religious ideologies based on theological texts. Let me now turn to a more specific discussion
of the same question of spiritual equality, with a focus on the framework of Sufism. As I noted,
Sufism is the most dominant type of Islam practiced in Senegal, which is why it is important to
look at some of the more specific understandings of this particular Muslim tradition in regard to
equality of men and women. To begin, I will look at some of the broader understandings of Sufi
scholars on the subject of spiritual equality, in order to subsequently turn to the more specific
case of Senegal as embedded within the Sufi context.

Exploring authors such as Javad Nurbakhsh, an Iranian scholar on Sufism and a Sufi
master himself, it becomes apparent that they have attempted to grapple with the question of
gender equality in Islam for a long time. According to Nurbakhsh, the question of whether there
is a distinction between men and women in Islam, and Sufism specifically, is one that is often
brought up in terms of their faith and their capacity to have the same amount of spirituality.
Nurbakhsh quotes excerpts from the *Hadith*[^4] that support the equality between men and women
in their spiritual form such as “God does not look at your forms,” which can be interpreted as
God only looking at the heart and its purity and not at the physical body and the gender of the

[^4]: Islamic text reporting the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad
heart (Nurbakhsh 1990:22). This supports the idea of spiritual equality, disregarding lived practices. Additionally, the author also quotes “since in the Ocean of Divine Unity (tawhid) neither ‘I’ nor ‘you’ exist, what meaning can ‘man’ or ‘woman’ possibly have?” This citation suggests that Divine Unity is not something that can be substantialized and that therefore the categories of woman and man are ones that are made up by human beings and that before God they do not matter (Nurbakhsh 1990:22). Similar to what some Islamic scholars that I have quoted earlier suggested, Nurbakhsh argues that in the Sufi traditions there should not be a difference in the spiritual ability of men and women. The markers that we use to identify the differences between men and women are human made and something that God does not look at according to the Sufi understanding.

Gürsoy-Naskali, an Islamic scholar from Turkey, further points out that the state of sainthood in Islam, a notion particularly important to Sufism, has been open to both women and men starting in the earliest times of Islam. She adds that historically speaking, many women mystics have been able to feel the force of divine love, suggesting that spiritual proximity to God is not something solely attainable by men only. As she describes, the goal of the Sufi, or the mystic, is that of a union with the divine, which is achieved by going through different stages that are considered to be attainable through self-discipline. The last one of these stages is that of the experience of divine knowledge and the vision in which the Sufi becomes one with God.

According to Gürsoy-Naskali, similarly to what Nurbakksh has said as well, “in such a relationship between the mystic and the Beloved there is no room for the distinction between sex” (Gürsoy-Naskali 1983:238). To strengthen her point, she quotes an excerpt from the Hadith stating that God only looks at the quality of one’s heart. Here again, the author tries to show that, within the Sufi branch of Islam, the realm of religious activity and most importantly the ability to
attain a certain height of spiritual validity are not restricted to men. Women, in fact, according to the Sufi understanding of one’s relationship with the divine, have the ability to attain the same stages of spirituality as men. The equal access to the divine for both men and women suggests that in mystical Islam there is no difference between men and women and that both are equally revered and part of the religious life.

However, this is not to overlook the fact that we can find significantly fewer accounts of women saints and mystics in historical texts throughout the history of Islam and Sufism (Gürsoy-Naskali 1983:242). When looking at historical indications and accounts of women’s roles in different Sufi traditions around the world, we are able to observe a clear trend. Even though both women and men are able to attain the same spiritual purity and are both able to travel on the mystic path and eventually achieve unity with God, history shows that in practice much fewer women have actually attained the stage of sainthood and have even engaged in the Sufi path. Consequently, even though according to religious ideologies women are considered equal to men in the spiritual realm of Sufism, men have still been dominant in the realm of religious leadership on the ground throughout history.

Let me now turn to some of the scholars that have looked at the subject of equality of men and women in the context of Senegalese Sufism. Christian Coulon, a French scholar focusing on Islam in Africa, implies that Sufi Islam, which he calls the “popular” Islam, involves both sexes, whereas the reformist and fundamentalist movements of Islam are often seen and practiced as a primarily masculine religion (Coulon 1988:118). As the authors previously mentioned have also suggested, there is a belief that Sufism offers women the space for more spiritual expression but also for a more active involvement in religious life in general. Coulon gives an example of this when he talks about the magal to Touba, a pilgrimage that happens
yearly in Senegal during which the followers of the Mouride brotherhood go to their holy city of Touba. He describes that it is both astonishing and impressive to see how many women are present during the festivities and can be seen both inside and outside the shrine of their founder and saint: “Like the men they use the occasion to visit their marabout, to organize religious chants and to wander though the holy city in their splendid boubous” (Coulon 1988:118). This account shows that Sufi Senegalese women are not excluded from religious life, but are rather active participants in it. In this particular case, their religious involvement and agency are acted out by visiting the shrine of the founder of their brotherhood, visiting their marabout to seek his help and guidance. Women also show their visibility by generally being as present as men during the festivities of the Mouride, seeing the magal as proof of their piety, their devotion to their brotherhood, and most importantly God.

Fatou, one of my informants, emphasized the importance of such religious activities and gatherings for Muslims, both men and women. According to her, such social religious gatherings are promoted in Islam, as there is a significance attached to “practicing together”: “While for Catholics, for example, praying is something that requires solitude to focus on your personal relationship with God, for us Muslims, it is recommended that we pray together as much as possible. Islam emphasizes the community and therefore religious gatherings and public religious festivities are an important aspect of our religion.” Public religious ceremonies such as the magal of Touba bring the community of Muslims together, celebrating their Sufi order.

However, it is also important to point out that women across Senegal might not always enjoy the same roles as men in the structure of the Sufi brotherhoods of which they are a part. In fact, there are differences among the brotherhoods that also characterize the different roles that women play within them. For example, the Mouride brotherhood that emphasizes discipline and
direct obedience to the marabout is often seen as being harder on women than the Tijaniyyah that puts great emphasis on education and is therefore often considered more liberal towards the role of women. Furthermore, the Layène brotherhood is thought of as having the most liberal of attitudes towards women of all. In fact, its founder Limamou Laye had encouraged women in his brotherhood and even supported their worshiping in the mosque, something that is rather unusual in the other brotherhoods (Callaway and Creevey 1994:46-47). However, in all cases, women can seek the same advice and guidance from their marabout as men, and the latter are usually willing to give the same attention to their female disciples as their male ones.

**Religious education as a path to equality**

So far I have explored some of the understandings of scholars as well as my informants on the subject of spiritual equality in Islam, both in a general sense as well as specifically in the context of Senegal. I will now turn to discuss in more detail the role of education in attaining this spiritual equality that so many of my informants emphasized. Religious education plays an essential role both in understanding the religion but also in establishing a believer’s position in the religious sphere of the community. My informant Fatou, for instance, emphasized the importance of a religious education in becoming a pious Muslim: “I received a religious education, just like all good Muslims. All Muslim children need to learn how to read, recite, and understand the Qur’an. Muslims should have the Qur’an, the words of God, in our hearts, which means being able to read and recite it.”

Religious education seems to be important in all branches of Sufism that are present in Senegal and many girls receive at least some education in the religious sphere by attending Qur’anic school, even though it might not be as extensive as for boys (Callaway and Creevey
Many of my informants seemed to have quite different experiences regarding their religious education, some of them having experienced it more rigorously than others. However, overall, all of the women I interviewed did in fact have some sort of religious education when they were young girls. Fatou told me that although this had not been the case for her personally, boys usually received a more extensive education than girls. She thought that this unequal access to education was a way for men to keep girls and women away from the equality that the Qur’an promoted so that it would be easier to control them. Fatou assumed there was a hidden agenda behind the unequal access to religious education. She thought that if women were to be more educated in matters of religion, they would also be more aware of the equal status that they have in front of God.

Not all of my informants had this same attitude about religious education in Senegal. Although most women I talked to agreed that boys, in general, received a more extensive education than girls, the justifications for why this would be the case differed greatly. Mrs. Sow Sidibé argued that it was not only in the religious education that boys were favored, but that this trend also applied for primary and secondary education in schools. According to her, this favoring is taking place mainly because of the expectation that the man would be the head of the household, needing to feed the family, while girls and women would be busy tending to the household and raising the children. Even the women that told me about the general trend of boys receiving a stricter religious education than girls acknowledged that in their own families they had received a similar or equal religious education to that of their brothers.

Rebecca Popenoe, an anthropologist that studied Azawagh Arab communities in Niger, observed a similar trend during her research where both girls and boys were usually taught how to read and recite the Qur’an, while boys tended to study longer. Additionally, Azawagh boys
were usually trained to chant the Qur’an publically, while girls simply needed to learn it without being able to recite it publically (Popenoe 2004: 65). Has education marginalized women on the lived religious level, or has it the opportunity to provide religious equality on the ground for both men and women if girls had more access to learn the religious ideologies?

While this question is too complex to answer in this thesis, I had the chance to visit one such Qur’anic school, a *dahira*, in downtown Dakar, where I interviewed Lamine, one of the Qur’anic teachers. When Lamine talked about the religious education provided to children at his own school, he suggested that there were some differences: “The education is a little bit different for girls and boys. Although some of the lessons are the same, such as reading and reciting the Qur’an, some of the topics are specific to girls or to boys. The subjects that are specific to girls include learning about how to purify after your menstrual cycle and other things. For these lessons, a woman comes and teaches the girls.” When Lamine showed me around the school, the sound of children, I am guessing around ages four to fifteen, reciting verses from the Qur’an sounded in my ears. The courtyard was filled with young students, the boys on one side and the girls on the other, all reciting the same verses in unison. When I visited another one of my informants, an elderly woman who was an active member in her neighborhood mosque, I witnessed a similar scene. Both boys and girls, although separated to sit at opposite sides of the space, were unanimously reciting the Qur’an, filling the courtyard of the mosque with their chants.

Later on, Lamine added that boys usually received a more prolonged education in matters of religion than girls. However, he did not attribute this to any sort of inequality in terms of lived religion, but rather to the fact that girls were usually busier in the private sphere than boys and did not have as much time to dedicate to their religious education than boys. Girls were often
expected to participate in the household from an early age helping out in the household, preparing meals, taking care of younger siblings, and preparing themselves to eventually become good wives. The religious education that they typically received was thus limited to what they needed to know to be able to practice their religion within the private sphere. On the other hand, young boys and men usually had more time to dedicate to their studies, which is why they were more likely to go beyond a basic education in matters of religion. More emphasis was also given to their religious education because they were going to be more present in the public sphere, and thus needed to have a better understanding of religious matters.

Even though the unequal access to religious education seemed to be widely accepted in the minds of most Senegalese Muslims, my informant Mrs. Bâ insisted that more and more women went back to educate themselves in matters of religion later on in their lives:

Men mostly get a more extensive religious education than women, which has to do with the fact that originally, men received more of an education in general (not only in matters of religion). However, there are women who have gotten a quite extensive religious education, even though they are still the minority today. I, myself, did not receive a very extensive one, which is why I am taking time today to learn the Qur’an every evening to make up for it. The religious institutions are mainly led by men, simply because they are the majority of people that are learned about Islam. However, maybe this will change in the future. The religious texts clearly indicate that knowledge is for both men and women. It is for everyone because if you don’t learn about your own religion, you can’t know God and respect the religion.

Mrs. Bâ suggests that, even though throughout history and even still today, girls have not received a religious education comparable to that of boys, education in Islam is known to be accessible to all genders. For her, traditional roles of women in Senegalese society have gotten in the way of girls claiming this right to their education, but she sees education as one of the main paths towards women becoming more aware of their entitlement to equality in lived religion on the ground.
Adeline Masquelier, an anthropologist who has studied Islamic revival in a small town in Niger, has observed this turn towards education in the ‘Yan Izala movement, trying to “liberate Muslims and ‘animists’ alike from the shackles of superstition and idolatry through education and enlightenment” (Masquelier 2009: 78). This Izala movement in fact seems to promote women’s right in education.

Women should be schooled, Izala followers assert, because they are invested with the sacred task of educating their children and taking care of their household. Because this activity should have topmost priority, women should be given the necessary tools (i.e., an Islamic education) to carry out this important task successfully. After all, the future of the Muslim community is in their hands. “Women are queens, it says so in the Qur’an,” volunteered a local Izala preacher (Masquelier 2009: 97).

Masquelier’s fieldwork in Niger points towards a movement that uses women’s education to promote their goals. Furthermore, access to education does not seem to, in this case, contradict a woman’s traditional role in the household and as the educator of the future generation. On the contrary, the important educational task that women have seems to influence the importance that Izala attribute to women’s religious education.

From the accounts that I gathered from my informants, it seems clear that all of these women had received at least a basic level of education, although many of them pointed out that boys were generally favored in this regard. Furthermore, it seemed important to many of these women, especially the ones that insisted on Islam inherently advocating for gender equality, that women were educated about religion and that they acquired knowledge about their own religion. They attributed the possession of knowledge about Islam and the Qur’an to a woman’s awareness of the equality rooted in religious ideologies that they could use to advocate for more religious equality on the ground.
Chapter 3

Lived Experiences of Religious Inequality on the Ground

The heat was already pressing when I woke up. I had been staying with my friend in the town of Mbacké for a few days now. It was a rather small town, in close proximity to the city of Touba, the holy city of the Mourides. I had agreed to visit my friend’s family with him and they had kindly welcomed me for a few days. While I had the opportunity to visit the city of Touba, including its great mosque, I also spent a lot of time hanging out with his family and friends, getting acquainted to their daily life style. After I had taken a bucket shower like every morning, I had breakfast that consisted of a piece of baguette with butter and a cup of Café Touba. My friend, a young man in his mid twenties, informed me that we were going to a naming ceremony this morning before we were going to make our journey back to Dakar in the early afternoon. He knew the father of the child, and it was polite to go pay one’s respect at the ceremony that typically occurred seven days after the child’s birth. This meant that I was expected to wear one of the Senegalese outfits that I had made during my stay. I chose to wear a bright blue taille-basse, consisting of a floor length skirt and a matching tight top. My friend put on one of his traditional boubous as well and we were ready to go. As we arrived at the house where the celebration was to take place, we were led into a courtyard where a group of young men were gathered to prepare for the celebratory day. The only woman that was present was myself, most likely because I stayed with my male friend, as I was obviously unacquainted with the procedures. I later found out that the women had gathered in a separate place, sharing the duty of peeling numberless onions and preparing the rice for lunch that would be served to the countless guests that were starting to arrive.

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5 A coffee beverage flavored with Guinea pepper and sometimes cloves and a popular traditional drink of Senegal.
As we were socializing, a young man came running through the door, alerting the others that their marabout had arrived. They immediately jumped up and gathered in a circle outside the house, partaking in the ritual of dhikr, which entailed their dancing in a circle while repeating the words la ilaha illallah, “there is no God but God” in a chant. After we watched this spectacle for a while, we were led inside the house. A young woman lent me her headscarf, which I was told to put on as we entered the room where the marabout had been received. We were welcomed by the marabout and received his blessings before the next group of people was asking for his attention. Both men and women were coming to see him, either to ask for his advice, or simply for his blessing, as I was told. Unfortunately I was not able to stay for the rest of the ceremony, as I had to return to Dakar to catch my flight home that same night.

Although I was not able to experience the rest of the ceremony that day, it gave me a small insight into the way that religious ceremonies of this kind were structured. Men and women often seemed to be separated throughout the ceremony. Women, more often than not were attending to their duty of preparing the meal that was going to feed the guests, while the men were usually socializing, sitting around and catching up. Throughout many of the conversations that I had with my informants during research in Senegal, women would allude to the fact that the equality that men and women occupied before God rarely translated in daily life, be it during religious ceremonies or in simple everyday situations.

While talking about what a pious Muslim woman was to her, Mrs. Ba mentioned that “in the religion, and most people know that, women and men are seen as equal before God. We have the same rights and the same obligations. And I often ask myself how can we be equal on one side and unequal on the other? We are equal before God, but we are unequal in the society.”
identified a disconnect between the religious ideologies of Islam and the lived reality and religious experiences in Senegalese society.\(^6\)

**Women as builders of Senegalese society**

My informants had many different justifications that attempted to explain the inequalities that women experienced in daily life, whether they were directly or indirectly attributed to religious practices. One argument that came up repeatedly was that of women and men having different vocations in life, permeating through to their experiences, even religious ones. One of the most important roles attributed to the woman was that of the pillar of the family and the builder of society. Throughout my conversation with Mrs. Ba, she identified the specific societal role of the Muslim woman as “building the society through the family”:

> The role of the Muslim woman, from a general perception, is to participate in the construction of the society, through the family. The woman plays this role of the builder of the family and through this perception the woman is building the man. In a sense she is at the center of building the society, given that she is in charge of the children’s education. Within this generally accepted perception her space of influence is centered in the private sphere, the home.

In the perception of Mrs. Ba then, the woman acts as the locus of the family, which is situated in the home and the private sphere. Popenoe describes a similar tendency among Azawagh women who primarily influence the private sphere or the home, representing the center of family life. The fattening ritual that these women often undergo, represent the stability of the family, allowing men to travel more freely: “By fattening women anchor themselves, but by extension their families, encampments, and the whole society and its cultural identity” (Popenoe 2004: 6)

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\(^6\) A scholar herself, this particular woman has studied Muslim women in Senegal in her own dissertation in sociology. It is therefore plausible, and very likely, that most Senegalese women that have not had the privilege to receive an education up to such an advanced level would not be able to clearly identify the disconnect she describes.
While Senegalese women do not engage in such fattening practices, their central role in the household also represents the stability of the family, which by extent stabilizes the society as a whole. Janice Boddy also observes an association of women with more interior and confined spaces in her fieldwork in Sudan that she describes in her book *Wombs and Alien Spirits* (1989): “There is thus a fairly firm association of women with internal affairs, enclosedness, and interior of the *hosh* [the walled enclosure of a house yard], and of men with external affairs, nonenclosedness, and the front of the *hosh*. (1989: 73). As this literature suggests, the association of women to the private sphere or the household is something commonly observed in Muslim societies, separating the spheres of influence of men and women. However, it is important to not that, while the Senegalese woman mainly acts in the private sphere, it does not discredit the importance of her role, which, according to Mrs. Ba, is that of the builder of society, the educator of future generations.

Through the conversations that I had with many of my informants, the confinement of women to the household and the so-called private sphere also translated into the religious life of these women. In fact, many of the women I interviewed talked about the restriction of women’s religious lives to the private sphere, with exception to public celebrations and religious ceremonies, where both men and women were usually present. One example of this restriction is the limited access of women to mosques. Khady, for instance, vividly told me about an experience she had made at a conference that she had attended at a mosque in Dakar, during which the topic of women and Islam was to be debated:

I’ve actually only been to the mosque once, and I was so disgusted that I’ve never been back. I went for a conference during the month of Ramadan that was supposed to talk about women and Islam. At the mosque, we women were simply put to the side, while men were inside and immediately outside of the mosque. We were sitting somewhere to the side, and we could only follow the conversation through the speakers that had been installed. Actually, no woman usually goes to the mosque, even on Fridays, except for a
few older women who have already gone through menopause. And if they go, they usually pray outside and not even inside the mosque. The mosque is a public sphere very much restricted for men.

Khady noted that the exclusion of women from the public sphere was not only something that permeated everyday life in Senegal, but that was also very much a part of the general religious experience of women.

Adeline Masquelier describes a similar experience among the Muslim community in Dogondoutchi, Niger. Similar to what Khady described to me, Masquelier observed that Muslim women in Dogondoutchi did not attend religious sermons. In fact, their presence at the mosque violated the rule of gender segregation in the religious sphere, which demanded that women pray inside their homes, limiting their capacity to display their piety through public acts (Masquelier 2009: 247). Rebecca Popenoe observes a parallel trend in her own fieldwork among Azawagh Arab women in Niger. According to her research, women were usually constrained to their tents, barely moving beyond this sphere that they were in charge of, while the men were constantly on the move. In other words, while men were most comfortable in the public sphere, women were usually most comfortable within the limitations of her own household, which is where they spent most of their time (Popenoe 2004: 159). Although restricted to the private sphere, Azawagh women did not experience this as a form of discrimination, but rather looked at it as having a different sphere of influence than men, focused around the household.

Looking at observations by other anthropologists that have done research in Muslim communities in West Africa, the confinement of women to the private sphere, namely the household, seems to be the norm rather than the exception. Masquelier suggests that one of the outcomes associated with this confinement is the fact that women often become less accountable for their performance of religious duties such as praying. The fact that they perform their prayers
indoors generally means that it is more difficult for anyone to counter their claims of piety (Masquelier 2009: 308). This argument resonates with some of the points that came up in my interviews with Senegalese women as well. Fatou, for instance, mentioned that men were often more incited to pray by their families, because they were going to be the leader of their own household one day, publicly representing their family’s piety.

Many of my informants highlighted that, although women were primarily active in the private sphere, associated with their role of being the educators of the next generation, it did not mean that they had no influence in the public sphere whatsoever. My male informant Lamine assured me numerous times that without women, there wouldn’t be a society. He suggested that it was not good to put women to the side, disregarding the importance of their position in the society and their influence. He told me about the Prophet Muhammad himself, surrounded by influential women that were beside him and influenced him during his lifetime. One example that he brought up was the Prophet’s first wife, Khadija, who was thought to have supported him financially throughout most of his lifetime as a married man. He also mentioned Aisha who was supposedly the Prophet’s favorite wife, who had influenced the Muslim community a great deal during her lifetime. After the Prophet’s death she had supposedly assisted in writing down hadiths and recorded some of his teachings. These historical references, he argued, showed that women were not supposed to be on the sidelines of society, limited to the household, but integrated into public life.

However, these historical figures have been rare cases, and the majority of women did not enjoy the same access and exposure to public life as Muhammad’s wives. Nevertheless, this is not to say that Muslim women in Senegal do not have any influence over public life, even though it might be a little subtler than the direct involvement of Khadija and Aisha. Mrs. Ba
beautifully described a common saying in Senegal: “In popular discourse, when a man has no argument, instead of giving you a response, he will say, ‘wait until the morning, I need to discuss it with my pillow!’ Of course, everyone knows that the pillow refers to his wife.” The woman’s opinion therefore does seem to count for something, but it is not always noticeable in the public sphere. Mrs. Ba continues:

The woman has an influence but it is hidden. Women are generally at ease in the private sphere, because that is what they are educated to do. A lot of women are not comfortable in the public sphere because they are not used to it and they are often uncomfortable speaking in public. This is because women are taught to follow the social order that says that a good woman needs to be less exposed to the public sphere and that she should not be known in the neighborhood, she should be hidden and not circulate a lot. She should even talk in a low voice, and she should take care of her family first and foremost. These are all values that are taught to us starting at birth.

While women have indirect influence on situations that typically take place in the public sphere, Mrs. Ba reaffirms the woman’s position as mainly being confined to the household.

The position of a typical Senegalese woman therefore seems to be in the confinement to the household, a place that she is trained to occupy and be comfortable in from an early age. The association of women with the private sphere seems to translate to all aspects of life, be it in everyday situations or in her religious life. Indeed, the separation of men and women during religious ceremonies can be looked at through this lens as well. In most cases, as I show in my account of the naming ceremony in Mbacké, women are responsible for duties that are mostly attributed to the household such as preparing the food for the ceremony.

When talking to Mrs. Sow Sidibe about the equality that God was supposed to guarantee to all human beings, she was quick to offer me some examples of instances where she had been discriminated against on the basis of being a woman, specifically in the context of religious gatherings:
Once I went to a religious ceremony, just as I do very frequently because I generally like to participate in the religious life of my community. Keep in mind that I am a minister of Senegal, and that Senegalese usually know who I am. At the moment that I wanted to speak in order to contribute to the discussion, one of the men in the assembly said: “Is there somebody that can talk for her, so that the others can hear?” He was basically implying that I should not speak out loud and that a man should speak for me. He did not want a woman to speak up, he wanted me to hide my voice. Some people believe that women cannot participate in public life, and should remain hidden from that sphere, which includes not speaking up in public. I was so mad. I have taught university courses and everything, why should I not be able to speak up? So I said to them, if you refuse to let women speak up, how are you going to educate your children?

Interestingly, while Mrs. Sow Sidibé experienced this discrimination on the basis of her gender in a religious public setting, the way that she attempts to fight it brings us back to the discussion of the female role as a builder of society in the form of an educator. In other words, she uses a typical role attributed to women in Senegal, that of the mother who raises her children, and therefore the next generation, to argue that it is important to let women speak.

If we look at the experience that Mrs. Sow Sidibé had at this particular gathering and compare it to the experience that Mrs. Ba had at the mosque, there is a clear pattern from the part of men trying to push women out of the public religious sphere. While they are able to participate in religious gatherings and ceremonies, women are usually confined to preparing the food for the guests and are usually kept on the sidelines. The experience that women typically have with Islam is therefore a very private one, restricted to their own household and their personal relationship with their marabout.

“Culture” – an obstacle for equality?

During many of the conversations I had with different Senegalese women, the term “culture” came up over and over. The way in which the women used it put it into contrast to religion. In fact, many of my informants laid out an argument claiming that “culture” had stained Islam,
overruling its inherently equal aspects by inscribing cultural traditions onto it that promoted inequality between women and men in the context of lived experiences. While it seems difficult to separate religion and “culture”, especially given the adaptive attribute of Islam referring to the way the religion incorporates aspects of and adapts to the cultures that it was introduced to throughout its spread, my subjects seemed to make a very precise distinction between one and the other, especially when speaking about equality. Many of them suggested that the inequality that permeated cultural Senegalese traditions (and in most cases these referred to pre-Islamic traditions) as well as inequalities that came from the Arab culture had influenced the religion to the point where these had affected the way that Islam was commonly practiced by Sufis in Senegal.

Many of my subjects also argued that the intricate connection that had evolved between Islamic ideologies and the cultures that it had influenced and that had in turn influenced the practiced religion, had led to a complicated picture. Saba Mahmood refers to a similar phenomenon in her own research in Egypt, describing a “folklorization of worship,” tightly intertwining the “local culture” and Islam.

Movement participants [of the piety movement in Cairo] argue that ritual acts of worship in the popular imagination have increasingly acquired the status of customs or conventions, a kind of “Muslim folklore” undertaken as a form of entertainment or as a means to display a religio-cultural identity. According to them, this has led to the decline of an alternative understanding of worship, one in which rituals are performed as a means to the training and realization of piety in the entirety of one’s life. Part of the aim of the mosque movement is to restore this understanding of worship by teaching women the requisite skills involved in its practice (Mahmood 2005: 48)

The intertwining of cultural traditions and customs linked to the religion that Mahmood describes in Egypt also resonates with the accounts of Muslim Senegalese women who talk about a similar situation.
Most Senegalese people have blended together religious practices and cultural practices to the extent that religion has become an aspect of cultural identity. Of course, this also applies when it comes to gender roles, when influences from both Islam and pre-Islamic Senegalese cultures merge to form understandings of gender roles in the society and lived religious experiences. Mrs. Ba says that the religious and the cultural aspects of society intertwine to shape people’s ideals about the role of women. She proposes that it would be difficult to speak about the lived religious experiences of women’s positions without connecting them to the cultural sources as well, not only taking into account religious ideologies:

The religious and the cultural are very mixed in with each other and the cultural often takes over the religious. People have a certain perception of what a Muslim woman should be, which take into account certain social norms formed by both of these influences. For the majority of Senegalese the Muslim woman has to respect the rules of Islam, and to respect these she needs to be pious. She needs to submit to God, but also to man. She should not expose herself too much to the public sphere. She should manage the private sphere, meaning the family, in a good way. This popular understanding of a Muslim Senegalese woman is the product of societal ideals and norms that have been influenced by interpretations of the religious texts as well as by pre-Islamic Senegalese traditions.

Mrs. Ba thus suggests that the idea of Muslim women in Senegalese society and the role that they typically experience in religious settings on the ground is influenced both by religious ideologies and pre-Islamic “cultural aspects.”

It is clear that the Islam practiced in Senegal is very unique to its location and to its population. The Sufi brotherhoods that characterize Islam in Senegal have incorporated many practices that date back to pre-Islamic traditions that were popular in the region before the rise of Islam. An example of such a pre-Islamic tradition merging with Islam is the widespread use of the “gris-gris” or téere in Wolof, referring to charms and talismans that are thought to protect individuals from illness, accidents, and the evil intentions of others. They come in a variety of
forms, many of which are worn on the body. They are most often bound in leather containing Qur’anic phrases or esoteric configurations of Arabic letters and they are manufactured by marabouts. Traditionally they were manufactured by traditional healers. One can see that this practice has been appropriated by Muslims in Senegal, incorporating it into their practices of Islam. Charms are still widely used in Senegal today and people see no contradiction in using this tradition while practicing a formal religion like Islam (Ross 2008: 40). This is just one example of how intertwined Islam and pre-Islamic traditions have become.

It is not uncommon that Islamic practices on a local level have incorporated local pre-Islamic traditions and have therefore adapted to the local environment. Ousseina Alidou, an Africanist and anthropologist who has studied Muslim Hausa women in Niger, highlights this phenomenon in different Muslim communities in Africa: “The Islam practiced by the Hausa, however, reflects a syncretism between Islamic spirituality and pre Islamic Hausa cosmogony that continues to prevail especially in Bori (spirit possession). This synthesis of spiritual worldviews is not unique to Hausa Islam, but is found in most other Afro-Islamic communities, such as those of the Somali, the Swahili, and the Bambara” (Alidou 2005: 132). It seems therefore to be the norm, rather than the exception that the Islam practiced throughout Africa has incorporated many local traditions into its practice. Furthermore, while I have focused on the “gris-gris” in Senegal, the analogy described by Alidou would apply to ideals and notions concerning the role of women in society. Ideologies dating back to pre-Islamic times would have infiltrated the views that Islam brought along upon its arrival in West Africa, creating new ideas about the role of Muslim women.

My informant Fatou did not fail to point out that in lived religious experiences, the position and roles of Muslim men and women were typically very different from one another.
During our conversation Fatou kept going back and forth between different reasons that she thought were at the roots of the different roles attributed to men and women. One of her theories brings us back to the dichotomy between religious and “cultural” influence. She explained that the religion had become so intertwined with other cultural practices that it became difficult to account for religious practices and cultural practices as separate entities. Fatou admitted that many Senegalese would not be able to differentiate between practices that stemmed from religious ideologies and cultural practices that had no connection to Islam.

One of the examples that Fatou brought up was the hierarchy in the typical Senegalese household:

Sometimes people will tell you that women should obey their husbands completely. But others will argue that Islam demands that men should treat their wives as their equal partner and that men and women should be in dialogue. Now it becomes complicated because the Qur’an can be interpreted in both ways, depending on how you read the verses and which ones you emphasize. So then the question becomes, should there be any submission of the woman in the household? And if so, is it because the Qur’an says so or because the society has been accustomed to do so, so we look to interpret the Qur’an in a way that supports this cultural practice?

Fatou brought up one of the questions that most often arises in the discussion of equality between Muslim men and women – that of the submission of the woman to her husband and men in general. She is not the only one that describes experiences of a woman’s submission as different depending on her location, and how much Islam and the “local culture” had influenced each other. Callaway and Creevey compare typical experiences of Muslim Hausa women and Muslim Senegalese women, noticing that Senegalese women typically enjoyed much more freedom of movement (such as working in the fields, appearing freely in markets and moving about openly in public places) than the typical Hausa woman, who had very limited freedom of movement and was much more secluded (Callaway and Creevey 1994: 31).
While it becomes clear that both Islamic ideologies as well as pre-Islamic notions and traditions have forged notions of Senegalese Muslim women’s positions today, it also becomes obvious that the two realms, that of religion and that of pre-Islamic culture, are very difficult to completely separate. Fatou acknowledged this difficulty in her argument. One example that she narrated to me was a common idea about gender binaries in Senegal, clearly intertwining the religious with traditions and common ideas that might have nothing to do with religion.

We are taught from a very young age that if women want to go to Paradise, they need to show allegiance and obedience to their husband. This means that they live under male dominion in an unconscious way. However, some people also believe that a woman should be a pious Muslim no matter what so that upon her death she receives her last judgment, which also requires that her husband was happy with her. She is ensured paradise for both her piety and her husband’s respect. This idea leads to the fact that some women live through the piety of their husbands, because they believe that they will ensure them a good afterlife. It is complicated because this understanding is sometimes used as a loophole by some women. While they are submitted to their husbands and have to obey them completely if they want to reach Paradise through them, they sometimes also see it as an opportunity to get away with practicing the religion in a less strict way, not needing to ensure their place in Paradise through their own piety.

This is a very interesting example of how women view their own position within the Muslim society in Senegal. As she put it, the belief that women attain Paradise through their husbands and must therefore obey them throughout their marriage, was not necessarily just a sign of female submission to Fatou. As she pointed out, it also meant that some women were practicing their religion in a less serious manner because as long as they were good wives to their husbands, they would gain access to Paradise through devotion to their husbands. Some of my informants suggested that it was likely that this was not the message that the Prophet had laid out to the believers of Islam, as the Qur’an emphasizes that both men and women have equal obligations towards God. This common idea in Senegalese society that was brought up by more than one of my informants was therefore an idea that had been shaped by more than just the religious realm.
However, I must add that this analogy that Fatou has pointed out is not an easy one to make. The Qur’an not being a straightforward document when it comes to religious equality, interpreted in different ways by different Muslim communities and even individuals within those communities, it becomes difficult to contrast Islamic ideologies with “cultural” influences. Not being able to pinpoint a common determining aspect that characterizes what Islam’s view regarding equality for men and women within the religion, whether ideological or lived, is makes it difficult to contrast it with any other factor such as “culture”.

As I have laid out, the connection and discontinuities between religion and culture came up in more than one of the interviews that I conducted. In fact many of the women agreed that there was an ambiguous relationship between what they saw as the core of the religion as established by the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet on the one hand, and cultural practices that were rooted in Senegalese pre-Islamic practices as well as the practices that had influenced Islam before its arrival in West Africa on the other hand. However, I was not able to collect much ethnographic data that actually exemplified this relationship, except for the few examples my informants provided, described above. In other words, the disconnect between the religious and the “cultural” seemed to mostly be a theoretical argument that my informants used to describe the lived religious experiences that did not align with their religious ideologies. The complex origin of some of these practices and beliefs regarding religious equality between men and women made it difficult, in the eyes of some of my informants, to advocate for the equality that they should have in the religious sphere according to their understanding of the Qur’an.
Chapter 4

Navigating Tensions Between Equality and Inequality

I want to say that women need to participate in the religious activities in daily life. Islam permits it and the religion itself is not the problem. So we have to look at the history of Islam and at the roles that women have occupied in Muslim societies in the past to give us a chance to reference our own history. We are Muslims, and when we advocate for equality men tend to tell us that we want to be like Western women. This is not true and we therefore need to look at our own history and take our references from there. All we want is a fair interpretation of Islam that creates a space for gender equality. (Mrs. Sow Sidibé)

Throughout my conversations with different Senegalese women, I found that they accepted and navigated the circumstances society and religion were giving them as women in slightly different ways. While until now I have attempted to highlight some of the notions regarding equality that my informants talked about, I will now turn towards a more detailed discussion of how women typically live with these different notions, trying to reconcile the aspects of equality and inequality that they highlighted. Of course, not all women that I interviewed felt the same way about the position of women in lived religious experiences. But one thing that all interviews brought forth was that we must not forget that women are their own agents, navigating the society and structures in which they live in their own ways.

Let me briefly discuss the notion of agency in relation to the narrative of Muslim women in order to ground the idea that women are in fact active participants in their society rather than passive bystanders. It is often assumed, especially from a Western perspective, that women who are believers of Islam, whether they are African or Middle Eastern, do not have much of what we call agency. Let me start of by extracting some of the meanings of the term “agency” and determining how scholars have used it. Janice Boddy points out that agency in the way we commonly define it is not necessarily expressed in the way that we assume it would be. She writes that the women she studies in northern Sudan “use perhaps unconsciously, perhaps
strategically, what we in the West might prefer to consider *instruments of their oppression* as means to assert their value both collectively, through the ceremonies they organize and stage, and individually, in the context of their marriages, so insisting on their dynamic complementarity with men. This itself is a means of resisting and setting limits to domination” (Boddy 1989:345). This citation supports the idea that agency is often expressed by women in a way that is more subtle and difficult from an outsider to observe, for instance by using the exact aspects that are seen as the cause of oppression as the tools to challenge it.

Saba Mahmood critiques the way in which the term agency is commonly understood, which she points out to be “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)” (Mahmood 2005:116). This understanding suggests that in the case of Muslim women, for example, their agency would only be recognized in terms of moments of resistance against the structure of male dominion. It implies that only in showing resistance or rebellion against the suppression that they supposedly live under are women able to demonstrate that they are active agents of the social structure they live in. According to Mahmood, the definition does not give space to the possibility of agency not as a form of resistance against male dominion, but as an expression of embracing accepted rules, which she describes in her work. In such terms, she defines agency not only as the expression of extreme reaction or even resistance against a social structure, but as any action from the part of the group concerned that could be the form of a challenge against the system, be it obvious to recognize or not. Taking into account these two differing understanding of how agency plays out in the context of women’s experiences in a Muslim context, let me now turn to ways in which Senegalese women use their agency to find ways to challenge the inequalities that they expressed to me.
Separation along gender lines or building women’s network

One of the ways that women in Senegal seem to become increasingly involved in the religious life of their community is by being active within their own networks of women. Mrs. Ba described this to me during the interview that I conducted with her:

Today, women look for answers that explain the lived religious experiences that Muslim women have. For example, we notice that women have become more active in diffusing the Divine message. They will tell you that it is a recommendation from the Prophet. But they will also tell you that there are so many questions that are specific to women and that men would not be able to talk about these. For example, questions about pregnancy and menstruation are usually only discussed in groups of women. So the direct involvement of women in the religious sphere actually has to do with the need of addressing questions that are specific to women. Men just couldn’t really take care of these specific questions, so it creates a window in which women can become more involved in religious matters.

Mrs. Ba’s account of rising involvement in the religious sphere seems to be closely linked to the creation of women’s networks. In other words, by taking responsibility for the religious education of the female population, women are able to access more inclusive involvement in the public space of religion while not completely undermining the superior position that Muslim men mostly occupy.

The sociologist Erin Augus mentions the networking of Sufi Muslim women in her work on the Sunnite Women’s movement in Dakar, a movement of Sunni reformists in Senegal. She points out that the networks that these women create can even include financial support of one another: “Female adherents of Sufi brotherhoods bestow honors upon one another, and provide mutual financial support in rotation credit clubs, groups that pool resources to celebrate religious pilgrimages and baptisms, and commercial exchanges at religious festivals” (Augus 2013: 81). While I did not have the chance to observe or experience such credit clubs firsthand during my
research in Senegal, I did observe that men and women typically socialized within their own
gender groups, men and women rarely mingling outside the family setting.

At one of the religious ceremonies that I had the chance to attend during a previous trip to
Senegal in 2011, this separation of men and women throughout the ceremony was clear, although
both were participating. I had been invited to attend a celebration in the honor of a prominent
marabout of the Mourides brotherhood, in a small village, about an hour drive inland from Dakar
(I briefly mention this experience in a previous chapter). As I was exploring the surroundings
upon my arrival to the village with another young European girl, I could not help but notice
groups of men and women socializing and celebrating in separate groups. A group of women,
dressed in beautiful indigo dresses was busily preparing enormous amounts of food for the
ceremony, while they were loudly chatting and laughing with each other. In another part of the
village, young men were spiritually preparing themselves for the nightlong celebration, loudly
chanting the words La ilaha illallah, “there is no God but God.” Later in the evening, the more
elaborate dances and chants began. As one person was chanting praises to Allah into a
microphone, women and men were lining up into separate files, surrounding the singer while
dancing in specific and repetitive steps. These ceremonial dances were to last until the early
morning, with the tireless dancers and singers praising Allah all night. Men and women kept to
their separate files throughout the entire process of dancing.

The social separation between men and women in Senegal, whether in a religious or daily
context, thus seems to provide a space for women to become more involved in public activities.
In accordance with Boddy’s interpretation of agency, Lila Abu-Lughod describes minor
resistances among Bedouin women, subtly opposing restrictions for women that characterize the
community. The author describes these acts of defiance as being expressed in different ways, for
example by hiding secrets from men, such as visits to friends and relatives, smoking of cigarettes, and trips to healers. The women cover each other and support each other in any minor matters having to do with hiding these things from men (Abu-Lughod 1990:43). Even though we might consider these matters as simply giving in to the submission and dominion of women by the elderly men, women describe these actions as part of protecting the separate sphere of knowledge in which these disobediences take place, which can be described as a form of resistance against the structure of their society. This example illustrates that women in societies that are characterized as dominated by men do not see themselves as passively submitting to the will of these men, but rather as using the prohibitions that attempt to control them as tools to shut themselves out of the men’s worlds and to create their own spheres of activity, hidden from the knowledge of the men.

In Senegal we can observe a similar activity in lived religious experiences of women taking control over their own realm of influence, rather than letting the men shut them out of the religious activities completely. By subtly creating these spaces, women are able to influence the public sphere in ways that do not directly confront men’s control of public religious activities. For instance, by controlling their own education, as I have mentioned before, women create networks that are exclusive and impenetrable by men. One of my informants, an elderly woman with whom I was unfortunately only able to talk through a translator that could translate from Wolof to French, was involved in teaching the Qur’an at a mosque. I met Aissatou in the mosque compound, in a very crowded neighborhood of Dakar. As I walked in and was introduced to her, she was leading a group of young children in reciting exercises. The children were sitting under a roof in the central open area of the mosque, girls on one side and boys on the other. The girls all had a headscarf loosely tied around their heads. They must have been between six and thirteen
years old. As I sat down to talk to Aissatou, she told me about the position and role that she occupied in the mosque. She was responsible for part of these children’s religious education, in particular the girls.

Aissatou was quick to point out the many ways in which women were sidelined within the religious institutions in Senegal, specifically in reference to her mosque. She said she could not participate in any decisions and the men were very clearly the ones that were leading the mosque. When I asked her how she dealt with this feeling of not being considered in decision making and being sidelined within her own mosque, she said that she decided to get involved through education. “By teaching the children and holding workshops and events for women from my religious community at the mosque, I am using whatever means I have to get involved and to take a part of the religious community,” she told me. Aissatou’s case shows a case in which a woman uses the framework of religion in order to make a difference and not by directly confronting it. She uses a network of women from her neighborhood as her realm of influence through education and religious workshops.

**Accessibility through “piety” and “purity”**

Women have also been able to create spaces of influence through other means. One way in which Senegalese women have been able to gain more respect in religious aspects of daily life is by showing strong and deeply rooted religious virtues. I started off every interview that I conducted with the question of what a pious Muslim woman should be and what her qualities would be. Most of my informants would emphasize that her inner virtues and qualities would be the most important aspect of a pious Muslim woman, maybe even more important than the outward manifestation of her piety. Khady, for instance, pointed out that for her piety is
something completely personal and interior: “It is between you and God, and your piety is not something you need to necessarily show to other people around you.” The virtues that are usually linked to piety can be manifold. Mrs. Sow Sidibé described to me what virtues and qualities a pious Muslim woman must have: “A woman who brings forth the values of respect of others, the respect of the human person, and a woman who is truthful and takes care of her family (and her husband if she is married) is a good pious woman. She must have the values of solidarity, of ethics, and of work.” These values that Mrs. Sow Sidibé emphasized are only some of the values that are commonly attributed to pious and good Muslim women.

Codou Bop, a Senegalese scholar focusing on women and Islam, discusses some instances in which Senegalese women have been able to access more religious influence by conveying utmost virtue. She points out that in Senegal the Mouride brotherhood has idealized the mother to an extreme. This is exemplified perfectly in the cult that has been created around Mame Diarra Bousso, the mother of Ahmadou Bamba. The author describes Bousso as being portrayed to have qualities such as patience, perseverance, commitment, loyalty, a spirit of sacrifice, modesty and the acceptance of seclusion. According to followers of the Mourides, it is because of her outstanding qualities and virtues that God chose her to bear her son Ahmadou Bamba who would found the brotherhood (Bop 2005:1114). The virtues that are described here therefore seem to be ones that are of importance at least for the Mouride brotherhood in Senegal. However, when we examine the nature of the qualities a bit more closely, most of them are not ones of leadership, but are rather virtues that would characterize a woman who knows her place and serves her duties within the structure that she lives in. Some of my informants pointed out this fact that her spirit of sacrifice for example suggests that she was probably following the will of others more often than taking her own decisions. Additionally, they suggest that patience and
modesty are both virtues that also suggest that she was rather following the lead of others and stayed rather secluded within the confines of the familial and religious structure that she was born into, following all of the rules and principles. Mahmood (2005) would argue that Mame Diarra Bousso, by embracing the accepted rules and the important female virtues, was using her agency to act within the system, while my informants were looking for more obvious instances of resistance.

The example of Mame Diarra Bousso in the Mouride brotherhood is interesting because it suggests that the role and power that women are suggested to have within the realm of Sufism seems to be subtler and not as public as that of men. Coulon reinforces that Senegalese women participate in religion in their own way. He says that their practices are more hidden and informal than those of the male community and that they are therefore able to manipulate religious practices and accommodate them to their own needs (Coulon 1988:115). The virtues of Mame Diarra Bousso thus would make it seem as if she was rather inactive in the religious sphere, simply following the lead of the male religious community. Her involvement in the spiritual and religious activities is much more subtle, informal and not as obvious to the public. However, as I have pointed out before, the fact that women’s participation in religious rituals and activities in general was more hidden and less publically known, does not mean that they did not have any influence on the religious community and that they weren’t active agents in it.

Similarly, Sokna Magat Diop, one of the rare women who became the caliph of her father’s subgroup of the Mouride brotherhood after his death, is said to have had a less public role during her time as caliph than a man would have. For example, she was much more reclusive, not making many public appearances, but rather spending most of her time praying or reading religious texts, and she would not go to the mosque or perform marriages and baptisms
as caliphs and marabouts usually do (Callaway and Creevey 1994:52). The difference in the way that Sokna Magat Diop lived in her leadership position and executed her duties emphasizes again that the religious life of women, whether in a leadership position or not, is mostly private and does not seem to be very active in the public sphere. This may be the reason why so many people commonly assume that Muslim women are not as active in the religious realm of Islam, because most of their spiritual expression happens behind the scenes in the confines of their privacy and might therefore not be as easy to observe and study, whereas men usually have much more of a public expression of the religion and therefore make it seem as if women are secluded from religious life altogether.

Another interesting aspect to consider that Bop brought up as one of the virtues of Diarra Bousso is that of modesty. This concept is often brought up in discussions about women and Islam, as it is often considered to be one of the most important virtues that a Muslim woman must have. In fact, many of my Senegalese informants brought it up in the interviews as well. Adeline Masquelier engages in this discussion in her book about Muslim women and girls in Niger. In her case the modesty of girls and women is something that is often guarded by the covering of the body and the use of a headscarf or a hijabi. As Masquelier explains, “pious femininity, here, hinges not on a verbal articulation of what it means to be a Muslim woman but on a corporeal sense of self-defined interiority” (Masquelier 2009:214). In other words, the covering of one’s body is a way for these Nigerien women to not expose themselves to the public sphere but rather to guard the virtue of modesty contained inside of their bodies.

Although Senegalese do not always wear head-coverings in daily situations, they are indeed required to wear them while they are worshiping, praying or engaging in any other religious activity. The way that the head-coverings represent the containment and privacy of
spirituality for women could therefore also be translated into the Senegalese case. While Senegalese Muslim women are engaging in religious activities, be it praying or the engagement of Sufi rituals such as *dhikr*, the covering of the woman’s head represents the containment of women’s spiritual expression and the importance for women to keep their religious activity to the private sphere, which completely aligns with the arguments of Coulon, Callaway and Creevey who have all respectively suggested this idea in their own literature. Some of my informants emphasized the importance of covering a woman’s hair as a sign of piety. However, none of them argued that it would be the most important aspect and all of them emphasized the importance of inner qualities rather than the outward manifestation of piety.

Saba Mahmood also discusses that the virtues of modesty and shyness as two very important aspects of womanhood in Islam. She discusses that, while most virtues in the Islamic faith are gendered, this is particularly true for these two virtues that seem to be most commonly attributed to women than men (Mahmood 2005:126). Thus, the author implies once more that the virtues that are commonly attributed to pious and devout Muslim women are in fact the ones that have traits of shyness and modesty, reinforcing the idea that Muslim women are internal worshipers and do not need to have much outward expression of their belief and their faith. This trend of women’s modesty as a necessary virtue for pious women seems to appear all over the literature about women in Islam, even though it is expressed or seen in different ways across Muslim societies around the world.

Let me now briefly touch on the concept of “purity,” which also plays an important role in women’s access to the religious sphere. Purity is seen as one of the main requirements for being able to be pious and access the religious sphere. My informant Lamine expresses this aspect of purity in his interview: “A good Muslim has to purify his or her heart. If they have
done that, then they can purify their body, and then their spirit. This is ultimately what all good Muslims are trying to achieve.” Purity thus seems to start in the inner self and eventually becomes manifested in its outward forms. I found, in fact, that Senegalese people, but especially women put a great emphasis on purity of the body, by washing themselves multiple times a day. One of my friends actually once told me “cleanliness is very important for Senegalese. It has to do with honoring your body and taking care of yourself.” This cleanliness relates to purity as Lamine described it.

One of the difficulties that women face, however, is that their period of menstruation makes them more receptive to impurities, and it is thus more difficult for women to retain their state of purity constantly. My informant Khady points out this out in her interview when discussing spiritual equality between men and women before God: “The only difference between men and women is that because of a woman’s period of menstruation, she is forbidden to pray or to fast during those days because she is not pure.” She says that because a woman is not able to attain a constant state of purity until she goes through menopause, she is not able to attain her full spiritual potential before this state as well. However, once she has gone through menopause, a woman does not have to worry about this purity anymore, which also explains why women that have gone through menopause are more often seen in mosques. Nobody needs to worry about whether they are pure enough to be able to enter this sacred space.

Rebecca Pepenoe discusses the relationship between inner purity and a pure body in her research in the Azawagh community.

The injunctions to empty the body of all compromising substances also speak to the concern with inner purity that is reflected in the protection of the inner spaces of the tent and women in general. Menstruation puts women in an impure state not only because the blood itself is conceived of as unclean, but also because in menstruation a woman’s body is opened and uncontained. (Popenoe 2004: 60)
Islam as a religion thus emphasizes not only inner purity, but also closely links it to outer purity. And this is not only true for women. Even men, before praying, must undergo the process of ablutions, which includes the washing hands, arms, feet, face and orifices – mouth, nostrils and ears – emptying the body of any “dirty” contents (Popenoe 2004: 60). Women simply have one more impurity to worry about as long as they have not undergone menopause. Even though this implies that women are more susceptible to impurity, it does not mean that they are not able to spiritually equal men, however. According to my informants, they simply must pay more attention to their body, and it is more difficult for them to attain purity. Once a woman has attained such a state of inner and outer purity, she is completely spiritually equal to men. This purity also gains her access to a more public sphere, as we see for women that have gone through menopause being more accepted to enter mosques.

**Using faith as a tool for equality**

One of the things that I noticed throughout my interviews as well as through the literature that other anthropologists have written on the subject of Muslim women, is that these women typically used religious ideologies of Islam as a tool for advocating their equality in lived realities. I have, until now, shown different avenues through which Senegalese women attempt to gain influence in the religious sphere. All of these avenues link back to Islam, which in these cases is used as a tool of advocacy, whether it is direct or subtler. Furthermore women often focus on the aspect of spiritual equality that Islam provides them with in order to advocate for a more equal treatment in their society. In other words, spiritual equality or religious ideologies are often used as an argument by women to change the inequalities that they experience in daily situations, whether strictly religious or not. Some of these instances of resistance are subtler than
others, but many of the women expressed this wish to translate the spiritual equality that they have before God into a more pragmatic equality as well.

Mrs. Sow Sidibé talked about this change for a more equal position for Muslim women in society in her interview. She was exercising a position of relative power within the Senegalese government, a minister in charge of human rights and peace and advisor to the President, in addition to being a Professor of Family Law at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar. Mrs. Sow Sidibé was clearly very involved in the political sphere and had serious influence within that scene. I am detailing the position of this particular woman in order to exemplify a case where the position of a woman is not only restricted to the private sphere, like a lot of literature on Muslim women illustrates, but that certain Senegalese women have been able to get opportunities to fully participate in the public, political life of their community. Mrs Sow Sidibé told me that she saw her religion as a tool that women could use to attain positions within public life in Senegal, just as she had done, instead of challenging the whole religious system and denying the beliefs of a major part of the Senegalese population. Mrs. Sow Sidibé’s way to make up for the inequalities that she lived and felt in everyday life was therefore not to turn her back on the religion or the culture that is supposedly responsible for creating these divisions between men and women, but rather to turn inside and look within the resources that Islam gave her and try to change the discourse surrounding women’s roles and their equality to men.

Similarly, while Mrs. Ba identified a disconnection between the religious and the cultural influences on Senegalese society, it was interesting to see that she also associated herself with a group of women that used the religion to promote equality between men and women in Senegal. In other words, she talked about herself as part of a group of women that are saying that Islam is a religion of justice and that for them justice is the act that is closest to that of piety. Their goal,
as she tried to explain to me, was therefore to anchor this justice that Islam stands for at the basis of the Muslim society of Senegal, something that she thought is currently not the case. 

Senegalese women have thus found different ways to navigate the religious sphere, so closely intertwined with daily life, and use different methods to work within the confines of the social order, challenging and questioning the system in an array of ways.
Conclusion

For me, God makes no difference between men and women. I think that physically and according to our roles in life on earth we are different in certain ways. But inside, we are exactly the same. (Mrs. Sow Sidibé)

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to analyze the experiences and notions about religious equalities and inequalities that I observed and heard about from my informants during my research in Senegal. When I originally started my fieldwork I knew that I was interested in the position of Muslim women in the religious sphere in Senegal, but it was not until later in the research process that I realized how important equality seemed to be in the eyes of my informants. It is because of the emphasis that they put on this particular aspect of their position in the religious sphere that I decided to focus this thesis on notions of equality.

While focusing on the equalities that Senegalese women did or did not experience I could not help but think about one of the phrases that anthropologists so often use to describe the discipline: “Make the strange familiar and the familiar strange.” During my fieldwork in Senegal I was very obviously an outsider, and trying to “make the strange familiar”. But as I went forward with the project, listening to Senegalese women talk about their experience of equality, I became aware of my own presumptions regarding the term “equality.” As I pointed out at the beginning of this thesis, I had the idea that gender equality in religion must mean that both men and women are given the same opportunities and the same access to the religious sphere. One of the things that I learned through the process of writing this thesis, however, is that this idea of equality that I had before beginning my research was far too simple to describe the experiences and narratives of Senegalese Muslim women.

The complex ideas that different women expressed to me highlight the diversity of experiences that Muslim women in Senegal have. Furthermore, it also suggests that there is no
answer to the question of whether Senegalese Muslim women are equal to Muslim Senegalese men in the religious sphere. As women experience religion in different ways, they also have different ideas about what this “equality” should look like. Each individual finds a different way to navigate the social and religious structures that characterize their environment. While in this thesis I have attempted to find some common themes in order to paint a picture of some of the structures that Senegalese women navigate, I will not claim that these are exclusive or characteristic of every Muslim woman in Senegal.

Finally, I would like to conclude this thesis by reiterating the importance to value individuals’ opinions and their personal experiences, not trying to make assumptions about a single communal narrative. Lila Abu-Lughod emphasizes the importance of acknowledging Muslim women’s individual stories in her book *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving* when talking about identifying human rights violations against women in the Muslim world (Abu-Lughod 2013: 202), and I would argue that it is equally important in trying to understand women’s notions about equality. While I hope that this project has given some insight into how Senegalese women most typically tend to position themselves in the religious sphere, thinking about religious equality, I do acknowledge the opinions that I have not been able to include, but that I do not devalue.
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