

2016

## Positionality and Feminisms of Women within Sufi Brotherhoods of Senegal

Georgia Collins  
*Humboldt State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ideafest>

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [African Studies Commons](#), [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Islamic Studies Commons](#), [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Regional Sociology Commons](#), [Rural Sociology Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Collins, Georgia (2016) "Positionality and Feminisms of Women within Sufi Brotherhoods of Senegal," *ideaFest: Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Works and Research from Humboldt State University*: Vol. 1, Article 3.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ideafest/vol1/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *ideaFest: Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Works and Research from Humboldt State University* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact [cyril.oberlander@humboldt.edu](mailto:cyril.oberlander@humboldt.edu).

---

# Positionality and Feminisms of Women within Sufi Brotherhoods of Senegal

## **Acknowledgements**

Dr. Kim Berry, Dr. Joseph Dieme

# Positionality and Feminisms of Women within Sufi Brotherhoods of Senegal

Georgia Collins

For this literature review I researched authorship concerning the positionality of women within the Islamic Sufi Brotherhoods of Senegal. Senegal is a secular country in West Africa with a 95% Muslim population. Lucy E. Creevey and Codou Bop assert that in comparison with women in many Middle Eastern countries, women in Senegal enjoy greater freedom of expression as well as freedom of movement.<sup>1</sup> “The position of women in Senegal on a superficial level seems to be one of relative equality with men, at least compared to women in many Middle Eastern countries.”<sup>2</sup> Bop states that “Although the population of Senegal has been in contact with Islam for centuries, Senegalese women, in fact, enjoy more freedom than do women in most Muslim societies.”<sup>3</sup> Women can be seen and heard in all public spheres, day and night. Veiling is not a requirement, and many choose not to. Senegalese women are known as some of the most elegant in Africa, at ceremonies every woman wears a beautiful brightly colored dresses and often shows off intricate coiffures.<sup>4</sup> However, Creevey and Bop argue that this is a superficial vision of equality and liberty and that, in reality, Senegalese women are still treated as second-class citizens; “Today, despite differences in the positions of individual women related to age, marital status, social class, and political involvement, it can be said that Senegalese women as a group do not hold high social status.”<sup>5</sup>

I became interested in this concept when I studied abroad in the capital city of Dakar for an academic year, and lived with a Senegalese host family. Senegalese women shattered my preconceived ideas of what it meant to be an African Muslim woman. The colonial discourses I had received throughout my life told me that these women were voiceless victims. From the start, I was surprised by the amount of autonomy these women seemed to possess as well as the freedom of opinion and movement they enjoyed. These women were not submissive or voiceless. These women move freely through space - yelling, laughing, chiding, flirting, very much visible and active. Living in a Senegalese home allowed me to see deeper into the complexities of Senegalese femininity and the role gender plays within the public and private sphere. In the home, women and girls perform the domestic work. These gender specific duties are ingrained and enforced. My host mother was a strong outspoken woman who was well respected within her community, yet she remained dutifully submissive. She was the caretaker of the house and family, and as expected, remained silent when my host Father spoke and worked while he relaxed. Having observed these contradictions my interest in Islamic African feminism in Senegal influenced me and my research for this literature review.

While resources on Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal are plentiful, finding sources that discuss women's positionality within these Brotherhoods proved much more difficult. I was able to find seven sources, ranging from in-depth analysis to broad understandings of the intersections of feminism and Islam. *Feminism in Islam* by Margot Badran, *The Impact of Islam on Women in Senegal* by Lucy E. Creevey, as well as a very specific article detailing *Roles and the Positions of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods* by Codou Bop all informed my analysis *Marabout Women in Dakar* by Amber B. Gemmeke, ‘*All Women are Guides*’: *Sufi Leadership and Womanhood among Taalibe Baay in Senegal* by Joseph Hill, *A Re-Shaping of Gender Activism in a Muslim Context- Senegal* by Rizwana Habib Latha, Mariama Ba's *So long a letter* and *The Educational Empowerment of Muslim Women* also by Rizwana Habib Latha and ‘*We Don't Want Equality; We Want to be Given Our Rights*’: *Muslim Women Negotiating Global Development Concepts in Senegal* by Nadine Sieveking were also very important in the shaping of this article.

Literature on women's roles and status within these Sufi Brotherhoods takes one of three positions. The first is that while Senegalese women have crafted spaces within the religious sphere and navigated these spaces with ingenuity and creativity, true and meaningful empowerment for women and

the promotion of women's rights is only possible through secular means. The second stance claims that through reexamination of the principles of Islam and its dominant interpretations that privilege men, feminists will be able to construct a new understanding of Islam that promotes gender equality on a grander scale resulting in liberation for all humans. The third stance expresses that the Sufi brotherhoods in Senegal allow women not only to occupy public spaces, but gain certain levels of religious authority. These authors do not believe that it is within the Brotherhoods alone that women will progress their status and liberty within society but that these spaces are significant and deserving of more interrogation. These authors believe that context-specific, strategic cooperation between women's rights groups and the political and religious will prove the most dynamic course to enhance the rights of all women in Senegal.

### Introduction to Senegalese Sufi Brotherhoods

In order to better understand women's positionality within Senegalese Sufi brotherhoods, we must first gain some basic insight into the creation of and maintenance of the brotherhoods. A relatively large amount of scholarly attention has been given to the Sufi Brotherhoods in general, and the religious leaders especially, because they navigate a unique space between the political and religious spheres of Senegal. All of my sources acknowledged the large role these Brotherhoods play within Senegalese daily cultural functions. One cannot walk two blocks in any city or village without seeing reproductions of the fathers of Mouridism plastered or painted on buildings, cars, and buses, and horse-carts. There are four distinct brotherhoods within Senegal, the two largest being Mouride, founded in 1905 by Amadou Bamba Mbacke, Tijiane founded in 1902 by Al-Hajj Malick Sy, followed by the Qadiriyya thought to be founded around the end of the nineteenth century, and the smallest, the Layenne founded around the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Descendants of these founders make up the majority of the highest religious authorities within Senegal. There is a strict hierarchy within the brotherhoods starting at the top with the highest Khalif who is a descendant of the founder, followed by Marabouts who are appointed by the Khalifs and are almost always descended from the founding families as well. The base is made up of *talibes* (disciples) who devote themselves to their Marabout and support them through lip service, economic contributions, hosting religious events in the Marabout's honor, as well as working for free on his fields. Although it is said to be brought to the country around the 13th century, Islam itself became the most popular religion in Senegal at the turn of the 20th century when The Sufi Brotherhoods began in response to French colonial conquest.<sup>7</sup> The *Khalifs* and Marabouts acted as a balm for the people who were suffering the material and epistemic violence of the French colonists. They offered the people an identifiable point of cultural distinction. Creevey states that "Many Senegalese have turned to Islam for affirmation of their national identity apart from the West."<sup>8</sup> People still speak of Amadou Bamba, Al-Hadj Malick Sy and their family "as opponents of colonization and heroes of the nation and as the saviors of Islam in the face of the Catholic French colonizers."<sup>9</sup> While at first these brotherhoods opposed colonial occupation, they developed an attitude of tolerance and cooperation, becoming the intermediaries between the colonial administration and the people. In return, these elite religious leaders and their families were given control over much of the groundnut production and trade, securing wealth and influence that is still visible today. Post-Independence, strong ties remain between the secular Senegalese state and the religious authorities. Marabouts still play a large role in the mediation between the state and the people. Marabouts support political candidates for office, and act as mediators in many economic exchanges as well as help settle such disputes as between trade unions and companies. Sieveking and Bop credit Senegal's political stability and peaceful status to this interdependent relationship.<sup>10</sup>

The Brotherhoods offer very specific anecdotes concerning women and their roles within the public and private spheres. It is very clearly stated that the path to reverence is through a life of piety and devotion to God and husband. While in reality each woman maneuvers her life uniquely, the admirable women in the Brotherhoods are the mothers of the saint-founders revered for their qualities of grace and submission to God and husband. A story I heard many times while living in Senegal focuses on Mame Diarra Bouso, mother of the saint founder of Mouridism, Cheikh Amadou Bamba. According to Hill's version of this story Mame Diarra's husband asks her to hold up the leaking roof of his reading room so that he can read his Qu'ran. He then falls asleep, forgetting her. Mame Diarra is said to have stood all night in the rain to hold up the roof for her sleeping husband.<sup>11</sup> This story is told to highlight the qualities

of a good woman. A song by popular singer Pape Diouf sings about Astou Dianka, the mother of Baye Niassé who ““never fought and never harmed him [Baye]...she had no use for sitting around complaining...she never yelled or laughed out loud...Ever pure for her leader (husband), she never left without permission””.<sup>12</sup> There is a yearly pilgrimage to the birthplace of Mame Diarra in Porokhane, Senegal. This is the only pilgrimage in Senegal dedicated to a woman. A beautiful village mosque is devoted to Mame Diarra and the water that flows from the well is said to be sacred and blessed by the holy mother. I was lucky enough to participate in the pilgrimage to Porokhane in January 2015, and was impressed by the relative percentage of women who had made the journey (in comparison to the ten or so other pilgrimages I took part in). The jubilation of the women was evident as they sang and danced for three days to devotional songs for Mame Diarra. I was continually congratulated on making the trip, and told that this pilgrimage was special because it was celebrating the sacredness of all women.

Bop, Creevey, Hill, Gemmeke, Sieveking and Latha agree that modern Senegalese conceptions of gender equality are constructed through the intersections of Islam, traditional values, and Westernization (the legacy of colonialism). They also all agree that there have been individual women who have risen within the Brotherhoods to positions of high esteem. The authors refer to Sokhna Magat Diop- a woman who was able to rise to the position of *Cheikh*<sup>13</sup> and have her own *talibe*. Gemmeke mentions Sokhna Magat Diop and states that “she was a religious leader who appointed *imams* (leaders of prayer); owned land cultivated by her followers, and performed ritual prayers.”<sup>14</sup> Bop states that “In Sufi ideology ascetic practices, abstinence, meditation, and mystical retreats or *khalwas* are crucial to accessing divine grace. Through her way of life Sokhna Magat Diop behaved according to Sufi requirements. Her mysticism seems to have overcome her limitations as a female and lifted her to sainthood. Because of her true Sufi behavior her disciples have been persuaded that she was as close to God as any other shayk and was gifted with strong and increasing *baraka* (divine grace) from which they would all benefit as well.”<sup>15</sup>

When discussing women’s organization within Senegal, Latha, Bop, and Sieveking believe it is imperative to discuss the concept of women’s groups or associations. These associations can be organized around a religious leader or as an independent entity. There is a long and strong presence of women’s groups or associations in Senegal, both in urban and rural areas. Some of these associations come in the form of *dahira* which “declares allegiance to a chosen marabout” and whose “role is to support him and to increase its own influence.”<sup>16</sup> This support comes in the form of economic contributions to their marabout (mostly urban) or through uncompensated work in the fields of the marabouts. Bop states that “it is increasingly through these organizations that women have expressed their spirituality and widened their sphere of influence.”<sup>17</sup> These associations can be very central to women’s lives and as Latha states “women’s increasing empowerment in the religious sphere is evident in the fact that the number of female-dominated *daairas* (*dahiras*) is growing.”<sup>18</sup>

There are also associations that are not devoted to a particular marabout, but that come together to organize ceremonies, rites of passage, as well as create possibilities for financial stability. My host mother was a part of a women’s group of sorts. Every month they would meet and discuss ways in which to collectively find forms of income. They pulled all of their resources and were able to begin selling *churai* (incense) and fresh bottled juices, and sharing the income from these endeavors. Latha states that “an important motivation in joining these associations is to mobilise resources through group action that offers material support as well as moral, and religious solidarity.”<sup>19</sup> Later in the essay, I will explore the ways in which these women’s associations are used to forward women’s rights.

### Advancement Through Secular Means

Bop states that “It is secularism and women’s empowerment through the defense and promotion of women’s political, economic, social, and cultural human rights that will change gender and class relations within Senegal society and will do so at a faster pace” [than Islamic Feminism].<sup>20</sup> Bop takes this position, stating that “it is through secularism and within secular, autonomous movements and in alliance with gender sensitive segments of society that Senegalese women will best be able to consolidate and expand changes in both the domestic and public spheres.”<sup>21</sup>

Although Creevey does claim that there is an inherent gender inequality within the Islamic doctrine, she does not suggest that women's empowerment is only possible through secularism. "Their legal status is subordinate. The testimony of one man is matched, for court purposes, by that of two women (Qur'an 3:283)... This clear second-class position of women in the scriptures and in the Qu'ran is part of the message that the teachings of Islam communicated to the Senegalese people when the religion was being spread."<sup>22</sup> Bop argues that women are continually marginalized within the Brotherhoods regardless of what little autonomy and space they are given. She claims that women's participation in and centrality to much of religious life in Senegal does not make Islam the best route for change. She states that "women continue to be significantly excluded from decision-making spheres within religion and therefore lack the means truly to address their situation."<sup>23</sup> She also claims that that dominant religious ideologies dictate who receives epistemic privilege, and that there are many barriers keeping women from gaining meaningful religious authority. *Baraka* is the Islamic concept of divine grace, controlled by lineage and inherited through the male line. A woman can inherit Baraka through her father or male family members but it is seen as an inherently male trait. Baraka is what gives religious authority as it is seen as divine power given from God. Bop quotes Donal Cruise O'Brien "In the Sufi brotherhood, baraka still has the quality of grace, bearing the promise of salvation, but it also comes to be identified with worldly privilege, with wealth and power. The poor pay tribute in various forms to the bearers of grace, in hope of a charitable return as well as a passport to paradise".<sup>24</sup> Bop goes on to claim that "it is relevant to consider baraka as an ideological construction that legitimates the maintenance and permanence of a group of persons at the head of the system and the exclusion of others who, by their spiritual qualities, might claim to possess such grace. Baraka, a notion of spiritual grace, thus functions centrally in a system of power to ensure inclusion and exclusion."<sup>25</sup>

Knowledge is important within all systems of hierarchical power --and Islam is no different. Bop writes "knowledge of sacred texts (the Qur'an, the hadiths, the tafsir) and of religious science, command of Arabic, outreach, and teaching have all been significant practices of the founders of the brotherhoods and their successors."<sup>26</sup> It is this specialized knowledge that garners trust and respect of an individual and it is this trust and respect from the community that deems them deserving of authority. Though Bop claims that knowledge is only for the already powerful in Muslim societies, it has also been used by women to refute the status quo. "[Knowledge] has empowered Muslim women to understand the discrimination they face and the social position to which they have been traditionally confined. It has enabled them to challenge biased interpretations of sacred texts and, within the brotherhoods, to confront the ideology that renders them marginalized."<sup>27</sup> The problem with this is that women are rarely granted the opportunity to learn the Qur'an let alone the hadiths. Literacy itself is an issue for women and most just do not have the opportunities that grant this specific knowledge.

The concept of impurity often limits women's power and access to religious ceremonies. Bop states that "Once more, a religious principle, purity, blocks women's access to knowledge and positions, denying them the possibility to ascend to places of greater leadership in the brotherhoods."<sup>29</sup> For instance, menstruating women cannot participate in any religious ceremonies, or lead prayer. "To perform religious practices such as prayers, *dhiker* recitation, pilgrimage, reading of the Qur'an, and the entering of sacred spaces such as mosques, a Muslim must be clean (*tahara*). As in all Abrahamic religions, women are believed to be unclean at certain periods of their life, such as during menses and bleeding after childbirth."<sup>28</sup> A woman cannot be counted on as a religious leader when one week of every month she is restricted in her movements and actions. As I will explore later in this article, the denial of menstruation is one strategy that women use to legitimize their religious authority.

The image of the "ideal" Sufi Woman is the third ideological construct that Bop claims obstructs women's advancement within Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal. Bop again visits the story of Mame Diarra Bousso who is seen as akin to the Virgin Mary of Mouridism, takes on an almost supernatural quality. "She is portrayed as having been gifted with extraordinary qualities such as patience, perseverance, commitment, loyalty, a spirit of sacrifice, modesty, and the acceptance of seclusion... All female disciples are exhorted to follow them and identify with them."<sup>30</sup> Bop claims this image of the ideal Sufi woman creates a dominant narrative about what, who, and where a woman should be. "The behaviors and atti-

tudes that support the structures of the *tariqas* are idealized and presented as normative for all women, and alternative interpretations of women and of religious life and organization are severely limited.”<sup>31</sup>

Bop argues that progress in gender equality can only be fully realized in the secular sphere, where it can be confronted openly and directly, instead of through innovative manipulation within the brotherhoods, which Bop sees as “a sign of powerlessness.” Because of their inability to address the issues head on, she argues “Senegalese women...are faced with a very dire situation marked by poverty, strong gender, and class inequalities to which religion, especially when controlled by conservative forces, cannot provide adequate solutions.”<sup>32</sup>

### Advancement Through Islam

I would like to quickly familiarize readers with the concept of Islamic Feminism as it is important to understanding my analysis. There is not one definitive name used to describe the theories and concepts born of the intersections between feminism or womanism and Islam but it can be summed up roughly as the “Women-centered rereading of the Qur’an and other religious texts by scholar-activists.”<sup>33</sup> Badran writes about Islamic Feminism and states that “Islamic Feminism argues that the Qur’an affirms the principle of equality of all human beings, and that the practice of equality between women and men (and other categories of people) has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideals (ideology) and practice.”<sup>34</sup> It is her belief that Islamic feminism accords Muslims the chance to review certain practices that privilege men as well as the chance to reinterpret “interpretation[s] based on men’s experiences, male-centered questions, and the overall influence of the patriarchal societies in which they lived” reinforce women’s oppression.<sup>35</sup>

Feminist Muslim theologians believe that when women have been denied social and political rights in Muslim societies “it is because of patriarchal interpretations of the sacred texts, not because of the texts themselves.”<sup>36</sup> According to Badran, “Islamic feminism insists on full equality of women and men across the public-private spectrum.”<sup>37</sup> Through the framework of rereading Islamic religious works like the Qur’an and the Hadiths without a male centered bias- Islamic feminists attempt to draw attention to verses that clearly affirm the mutuality of responsibilities of men and women within a partnership, not a dictatorship. Badran states that “Islamic feminist discourse...closes gaps and reveals common concerns and goals, starting with the basic affirmation of gender equality and social justice.”<sup>38</sup>

Badran<sup>39</sup> and Shaikh<sup>40</sup> claim that through reexamination of the principles of Islam and its dominant interpretations that favor men above women, feminists will be able to construct a new understanding of Islam that promotes gender equality and on a grander scale, liberation for all humans. Shaikh states that Sufi Islam specifically allows for these reinterpretations, because Sufism at its base is focused on the God-human relationship and does not delineate a difference between the genders in ability to further this relationship. She argues that:

Certain Sufi discourses possibly present more faithful readings of the shari’a and the related assumptions of human nature, as reflected in the Qur’an, than the dominant *fiqh* discourses... An approach to the law that is nurtured in the soil of Islamic spirituality offers more than simple gender equality. It fosters a more holistic vision of community, one that facilitates the process of human spiritual refinement- a refinement to which gender equality is absolutely intrinsic.<sup>41</sup>

### Advancement Through a Combination of Strategies

In contrast to the concept that progress can only be made either through strictly secular means, or through Islamic Feminism, Hill, Latha, and Sieveking write a meshing of tradition and religion with political and activist spheres that will best serve to promote women’s rights. Joseph Hill writes that urban women in Dakar have been able to gain religious authority through the appointing of *muqaddams* or spiritual guides. Originally only granted to men a strongly influential leader of the Tijiane order, Baaye Niass began to appoint women to these positions. The *muqaddmmas* (female version of *muqaddams*) create their livelihoods through charging for spiritual counseling and guidance, often supporting themselves and their entire families on their earnings. The women leaders claim an acknowledged connection between

the mothering and being a spiritual guide; “these leaders recognize that, like childbirth, the perilous process of Sufi initiation requires a guide naturally inclined to nurture and care for new initiates”.<sup>42</sup>

Hill discusses the fact that highly educated and well respected women Islamic scholars and religious leaders are 1) mostly all married and 2) continue to show submission, acknowledging their husbands as heads of household, regardless of if her husband holds a much lower religious status. Hill sees these acts of submission (household tasks, curtsying, etc) as “a performance- a true and socially necessary performance, but one that contrasts with a deeper truth”.<sup>43</sup> Hill claims this is consistent with many powerful women’s self presentation. Hill underlines the point that through these ‘performances’ as he calls them, it is not that the women truly believe they are inferior, or see them as inherently repressive acts. They see them as a tool for navigating their complex world, maintaining their authority through both acts of leadership, as well as through acts of humility through the love of God. Hill states that “[s]uch a ‘performance’ is neither a disingenuous charade nor a naive reproduction of social roles but rather an act presented as an act intended to have multiple interpretations”.<sup>44</sup> He continues- “Some *muqaddamas* explicitly describe acts of submissiveness and interiority as ritual performances between the performance’s apparent (*zahir*) meaning and the hidden (*batin*) truth behind it.”

Hill states, “resisting the structures of patriarchal domination would be a meaningless question to many Senegalese women.” Instead, he argues that we should look at the ways in which women navigate epistemic authority. He writes that “Muqaddamas use established gender norms to reverse the hierarchies these norms often uphold, accentuating the equivalence between submission and ‘Islam’ (submission in Islam), interiority and hidden knowledge and motherhood and spiritual leadership”.<sup>45</sup> Hill asserts that the continual reverence of their husbands and the fulfillment of what are seen as a wife’s duties are a performance in which these women can garner more religious authority through exhibiting piety and humility before God.<sup>46</sup> “Wifely submission is not a mere act but can require significant compromises. However, in certain circumstances, acts of submission and self-effacement can bolster moral authority”.<sup>47</sup> He believes that it is through these acts of piety that *muqaddamas* are able to show their spiritual and moral authority. Hill writes that none of these women would see themselves as feminists or activists; “[d]espite speaking of gender equality and liberation, none hinted at overthrowing patriarchal structures or taking power for women. Rather, they depicted power and authority as things that God has given women as well as men. The question was how to cultivate, present, and exercise it”.<sup>48</sup>

Gemmeke also writes about women who have chosen to pursue careers based on an assumed religious authority or purity that allows them to offer their services to others. Gemmeke offers the term “esoteric knowledge” to refer to parts of Senegal’s mysticism and forms of traditional knowledge such as dream interpretations, prayer sessions, numerology and astrology as well as divination sessions. As Hill states in his article, those who perform these tasks are commonly referred to as marabouts, and this work is seen as a job. As esoteric knowledge is generally a male dominated field, not much media or academic attention goes to the women performing these tasks. Gemmeke argues that the fact that these women both live in Dakar plays a large role in the possibility for them to work in this way, highlighting the role that modernization plays in creating new spaces for expression and practice. Gemmeke’s article follows the lives of two female marabouts who glean their livelihoods from the establishment of their expertise and authority as possessors of this esoteric knowledge outside of the brotherhoods.

Gemmeke asserts that they do this through claiming possession of and displaying qualities that are normally associated with men. Both women claim to having never menstruated, which is a huge barrier for most women to gain religious authority because they cannot participate in any religious ceremonies or acts while they are bleeding. Like Creevey, Gemmeke claims that women’s position was higher in traditional society with women being involved in religious ceremonies as well as holding positions of power within communities. She disputes the idea that Senegalese women are invisible victims within the Sufi Brotherhoods stating that “not all women remain invisible or powerless within the brotherhood structure”.<sup>49</sup> “Senegalese female experts in Islamic esoteric knowledge are neither exclusively products of a marginalization process a use by Islam or Islamic reformism nor representations of an Islam that been manipulated to their advantage. They are both, and more”.<sup>50</sup>

Sieveking agrees that women in Senegal use religion creatively, and navigate different performances within Islam to survive. She refutes the image of African Muslim women as vulnerable victim with no autonomy. “Women are not only acting according to prescribed religious rules and norms, but also use religion instrumentally”.<sup>51</sup> She goes on to claim that Islam actually gives a supportive network from which to work from. “The framework of a widespread and socially accepted religious practice allows women to develop agency, expand their room for negotiation and redefine the boundaries of traditional social structures without explicitly putting them into question”.<sup>52</sup> Sieveking claims that women and then the men should get involved, because the issue concerned men and women equally. Sieveking underlined the importance of communicating with the religious authorities, to tell them that the campaign was not aimed at “making politics”, and that the women were in fact only asserting their rights. “Diagne described how a group of women activists from the RSJ (The Réseau Siggil Jigéen NGO) had talked with the highest representatives of the Tijan and Murid brotherhoods to make their intentions clear. The experience of meeting them and being listened to had been empowering: ‘To talk with the marabouts directly - that’s a good thing!’”.<sup>53</sup> Sieveking writes that “depending on the context and the women’s own social and economic background, they might use a progressive Islam interpretation such as the ‘religious argumentation for gender equity’ or prefer to rely on alliances with traditional Sufi authorities, who know that their female disciples can easily withdraw their social and economic support if their needs and expectations are ignored. Analysing women’s diverse negotiation strategies and the way they relate global and local discourses thus allows the question of the current labels of vulnerability and victimization, almost stereotypically applied to Muslim societies in public discourses on a global level”.<sup>54</sup>

Latha disagrees with Bop that the secular route is the only route towards progress because religion plays such a central role in the lives of all Senegalese. She writes that is the combination of Islam, traditional values, as well as pieces of Western thought that will be most beneficial to women’s rights movements in Senegal in conjunction with cooperation between men and women. Latha discusses how the idea of women’s groups or associations has been used by feminist groups in Senegal to forward possibilities of creating gender equality. Instead of only organizing ceremonies and economic contributions, they used the platform given to women’s associations to educate and create awareness of issues, grappling specifically with women’s empowerment through multiple facets. Latha discusses the significance of the group Yewwu-Yewwi (raise consciousness for liberation) which was started in 1980 and sparked the fight for gender equality.<sup>55</sup> This group was composed of women educated in French schools in Senegal which garnered criticism of the group being elitist, unrealistic and out-of-touch. Yewwu-Yewwi did push for the Family Code which was adopted in 1989 but as Latha states the Code seemed to only help educated, urban women who were aware of the Code and what it meant.

The group Réseau Siggil Jigéen (RSL) is currently working towards women’s rights concentrating on the cooperation between men and women as well as the political and religious spheres to enhance women’s positionality. “Feminists are trying to promote their individual political, economic and social agendas outside the parameters of the religious establishment, the argument that this strategy will lead to real transformation does not seem to be a viable proposition in a country in which religious practice plays such a central role in everyday life”.<sup>56</sup> She states that for activism and resistance to be purposeful, it must be contextual and based on the lives of those it claims to serve. She asserts that given the socio-political-economic state of West Africa and specifically Senegal, approaches that incorporate the religious, political spheres with the narratives of everyday women is the approach that will prove the most progressive and see the most success. Latha claims that to leave the religious sphere out of the equation is to ignore the huge role religion plays Senegalese society.

Latha introduces the concept of African-Islamic Womanism as a context specific negotiation of rights and representation. “African-Islamic womanism focuses on challenging traditional class and caste hierarchies by reaching out to women in all sectors of society especially in rural areas, to facilitate positive changes. Their strategies include working closely with government agencies and the powerful male-dominated religious organisations”.<sup>57</sup> Her thesis is that “the most pragmatic and effective strategies for gender equity are being spearheaded by women’s associations such as the RSJ, as they are firmly rooted in their West-African socio-cultural and religious milieu and advocate for men and women to

work together to promote gender equity”.<sup>58</sup>

Creevey states that on the surface Senegalese women could be seen as having something close to equality with men in ways I have described earlier. Creevey claims that we cannot understand the true “status of women” within Senegal without looking at other factors including education where 20% of women are literate, and girls comprise only 41% percent of the total school attendance. She also looks the economy- where women have entered into wage work, but still have difficulty securing high positions, and politics where women hold a high percent of national positions but in no way vote as a unit or provide a space for the discussion of women’s equality. Creevey states that there are a multiplicity of different factors that contribute to women’s role within Senegal including traditional systems, colonization, and Westernization.

The subject of women’s roles and positionalities within the Sufi Brotherhoods, as is the case of the positionality of women everywhere, is many-layered and complex. The authors of the literature included in this review have varied opinions about what is the best approach to ensure women’s continued progression towards increased autonomy and agency within Senegalese society. Bop believes that it is through secular means only that women can progress. Badran and Shaikh argue that Islamic Feminism creates an avenue to contest patriarchal readings of the Qu’ran and other sacred Islamic texts, as well as the idea that Islam is inherently oppressive of women. Hill, Sieveking, Gemmeke, Creevey, and Latha all argue that it is through the creative combining of the religious and political, as well as the public and private spheres that women are able to combat sexist policies and practices within Senegalese society. I found that within the literature, it was the presence of women’s narratives and voices in the text that were the most compelling because of the richness and authenticity experience brings. When we are able to read about women negotiating and navigating through systems of power and privilege in their own unique ways, we are able to see a truthful representation of their struggles and their achievements. It is important that these women are seen clearly and contextually, not as victims of colonization, an oppressive religion, “backward’s traditions, or an immobile society, but as creative authors of their own narratives. Regardless of the method of resistance being employed, be it within, without, or woven between the existing power structures, it is critical that the voices at the center of any movement are the voices of those who are directly involved. Any research void of these voices will be lacking value, as what scholars believe of the positionality of women in any society is only relevant if the women themselves are somehow involved in the process. As Hill states “I have not attempted to evaluate whether Taalibe Baay *muqaddamas* are effectively resisting the structures of patriarchal domination, a question that most of these women would surely find meaningless”.<sup>59</sup> As is clear by the literature presented in this review, transnational feminist movements and spaces of resistance are not always radical self-realized spaces. Negotiation and navigation of power structures comes in many forms and fashions, each as unique as the individuals and/or communities that birth them. It is important to recognize this truth, because without this understanding, many actors, spaces and methods of creative resistance might potentially be overlooked or ignored because they do not fit into standard perceptions of what of activism, feminism, or liberation is or looks like.

#### About the Author

*Georgia graduated from HSU with a BA in Cultural Anthropology and minors in French and Francophone Studies and CRGS; Gender Studies in May 2016. She studied abroad in Dakar, Senegal during the 14-15 academic year, and is returning in November 2016 to begin a job as a Team Leader with Global Citizen Year. She is interested in the intersections of spirituality, art, music, and social justice. She would like to thank Dr. Kim Berry and Dr. Joseph Dieme for their help with this article. Georgia can be contacted at gnc47@humboldt.edu.*

## Notes

1. The use of “status of women” is a colonial tool to used to relegate the complexities of each woman’s positionality within a society into one blanket statement. It is a harmful and overly simplistic practice that creates stereotypes about cultures, religions, and the women within them. I am including these quotes in my introduction because it helps to place Senegal on a global scale and in relation to other Muslim countries.

2. Lucy E. Creevy, “The Impact of Islam on Women in Senegal,” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 25.3, (1991): 348.

3. C. Bop. “Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 no.4, (2005): 1103

4. Lucy E. Creevy. “The Impact of Islam on Women in Senegal,” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 25.3, (1991): 348

5. C. Bop. “Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 no.4, (2005): 1107.

6. Ibid., 1104.

7. Ibid., 1103.

Lucy E. Creevy. “The Impact of Islam on Women in Senegal,” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 25.3, (1991): 358.

8. Ibid., 360.

9. C. Bop. “Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 no.4, (2005): 1106.

10. Ibid., 1105.

Nadine Sieveking. “‘We Don’t Want Equality; We Want to Be Given Our Rights’: Muslim Women Negotiating Global Development Concepts in Senegal,” *Africa Spectrum* 42 no. 1(2007): 32.

11. Joseph Hill. “‘All Women are Guides’: Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal.” *Journal of Religion in Africa*. 40 no. 4 (2010): 399.

12. Ibid., 399.

13. *Cheikh* is a Wolofized version of *Shaykh Al-Islam*, a person learned in Islamic Sciences.

14. Amber B. Gemmeke. “Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge.” *African: Journal of the International African Institute* 79 no. 1. (2009):134.

15. Ibid.

16. C. Bop. “Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 no.4, (2005): 1108.

17. Ibid, 1108.

18. Rizwana Habib Latha. “Feminisms in an African Context: Mariama Ba’s ‘So Long a Letter,’” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equality* 28 no.83 (2011): 56.

19. Ibid., 56.

20. C. Bop. “Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 no.4, (2005): 1102.

21. Ibid, 1118.

22. Creevy, Lucy E, “The Impact of Islam on Women in Senegal,” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 25.3, (1991): 361.

23. C. Bop. “Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 no.4, (2005): 1118.

24. Ibid., 1112.

25. Ibid., 1113.

26. Ibid., 1113.

27. Ibid., 1112.
28. Ibid., 1114.
29. C. Bop. "Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 no.4, (2005): 1112.
30. Ibid., 1114.
31. Ibid., 1115.
32. Ibid., 1002.
33. Margot Badran. *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. London: Oneworld Publications (2009): 244.
34. Ibid., 247.
35. Ibid., 247.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 250.
38. Ibid., 246.
39. Ibid., 250.
40. S. Shaikh. "In Search of Al-Insan: Sufism, Islamic Law, and Gender," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77 no. 4 (2009): 781-822.
41. Ibid., 781, 789.
42. Joseph Hill. "'All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal." *Journal of Religion in Africa*. 40 no. 4 (2010): 376.
43. Ibid., 399.
44. Ibid., 384.
45. Ibid., 402.
46. Ibid., 384.
47. Ibid., 402.
48. Ibid., 401.
49. Amber B. Gemmeke. "Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 79 no. 1, (2009): 134.
50. Ibid., 144.
51. Nadine Sieveking. "We Don't Want Equality; We Want to Be Given Our Rights: Muslim Women Negotiating Global Development Concepts in Senegal," *Africa Spectrum* 42 no. 1(2007): 44.
52. Ibid., 35.
53. Ibid., 44.
54. Ibid., 45.
55. Rizwana Habib Latha. "Feminisms in an African Context: Mariama Bâ's so Long a Letter." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 24 no. 83 (2011): 58.
56. Ibid., 56.
57. Ibid., 56.
58. Ibid., 66.
59. Joseph Hill. "'All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal." *Journal of Religion in Africa*. 40 no. 4 (2010): 401.

## References

- Bop, C. "Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73.4 (2005): 1099-119. *JAAR - Oxford Journals*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.
- Creevey, Lucy E. "The Impact of Islam on Women in Senegal." *The Journal of Developing Areas* 25.3 (1991): 347-68. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.
- Cruise O'Brien, Donal. "Introduction." *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, 113-135. (1988). London: Clarendon Press Oxford.
- Gemmeke, Amber B. "Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 79.1, Knowledge in Practice: Expertise and the Transmission of Knowledge (2009): 128-47. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015
- Hafez, Sherine. "Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences by Margot Badran." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7.2 (2011): 114-17. Web.
- Hill, Joseph. "'All Women Are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood among Taalibe Baay in Senegal." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 40.4 (2010): 375-412. *JSTOR [JSTOR]*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.
- Latha, Rizwana Habib. "A Re-shaping of Gender Activism in a Muslim Context- Senegal." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equality* 24.83 (2011): 55-67. *Unisa.ac.za*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015
- Latha, Rizwana Habib. "Feminisms in an African Context: Mariama Bâ's so Long a Letter." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* No. 50. African Feminisms One (2001): 23-40.
- Reverand-Coulon, Odile "Le *Dahira* de MamDiarra Bousso à Mbacké. Analyse d'une Association Religieuse de Femmes Sénégalaises." *Transforming Female Identities, Women's Organizational Forms in West Africa*, 160-174. Uppsala, Sweden: The Nordic Africa Institute.
- Shaikh, S. "In Search of Al-Insan: Sufism, Islamic Law, and Gender." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77.4 (2009): 781-822. Web. 16 Nov. 2015
- Sieveking, Nadine. "'We Don't Want Equality; We Want to Be Given Our Rights': Muslim Women Negotiating Global Development Concepts in Senegal." *Africa Spectrum* 42.1 (2007): 29-48. *JSTOR.web*. 12 Nov. 2015. *TOR*. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.