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ISLAM AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AMONG THE TIJANIYYA IN NIGER

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I am presently engaged in research on political inclusion and the dynamics of democratization¹ in Niger, a secular state with a population that is 98.7% Muslim.² The study focuses on the Niass branch of the Tijaniyya, a Sufi Muslim order distinguished by the simplicity of its rituals, the premium placed on the virtue of tolerance, and the religious scholarship and promotion of education by its founder, Ibrahim Niass (1902-1975). These attributes have given the Niassene Tijaniyya a degree of flexibility and openness to innovation that is lacking among more conservative branches of Sufism and many other forms of Islam. The Tijaniyya Ibrahimiyya is now the largest and fastest growing Sufi religious order in Niger.³ In recent years, the leadership has reversed a longstanding practice of remaining aloof from politics and is actively participating in new political structures created at the local and national levels of government in Niger's Fifth Republic. The logic that informs the behavior of Tijani religious leaders as they interact with other Muslim groups, compete for religious followers, and engage the state in a pluralistic political arena, is subtle and complex. I argue that in Niger, female empowerment has emerged as a significant factor in the order's global political agenda to revitalize its structures, counter the Islamists, and broaden its base.

Empowerment involves several interrelated processes affecting the social, economic, political, psychological, legal and cultural spheres. I will use field theory, as developed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, to conceptualize and analyze these processes.⁴ I have chosen to study the phenomenon of female empowerment through the work, life, and networks of Saïda Oumul Khadiri Niass (*aka* Mamma Kiota). Originally from Senegal, she is a Tijani spiritual leader, a daughter of Ibrahim Niass, and wife of the late Cheikh Aboubacar Assimi of Kiota, who was the Grand Caliph of the Niassene Tijaniyya in West Africa.⁵ A venerated personality in her own right, the charismatic Mamma Kiota strategically deploys a mix of personal authority, spiritual authority, cultural capital and kinship ties to obtain financial resources and technical support for girls and women to have access to franco-arab education, maternal and child health care, training in income-generating skills, and Islamic knowledge. She engages the state to articulate a broadly construed agenda of female empowerment that connects women with the pilgrimage economy and is grounded in an interpretation of the Koran and the *Hadith*. Hence, her approach is culturally sustainable.

I am working toward a spatial analysis that locates Mamma Kiota's project of female empowerment in the landscape of Muslim religious movements within Niger, as well as in trajectories that straddle the larger geostrategic space of the Niassene Tijaniyya, with its three religious poles being *zawiyas* and/or pilgrimage sites in Kaolack (Senegal), Kiota (Niger) and Kano (Nigeria). I am also interested in a processual analysis that situates the project of female empowerment in the context of profound transformations that have affected political and religious life for Nigerien individuals as well as their communities.

The proclamation of multipartyism in Niger in November 1990 gave rise to the pluralization of associational life – including the religious landscape. From one officially sanctioned Islamic Association of Niger (IAN) that served the military regime as an instrument of legitimation and control, there are now more than 50 active Islamic associations. The old IAN promoted a unitary Islamic discourse that was generally scornful of traditional Sufi orders and suppressed Islamist movements. The Tijaniyya Ibrahimiyya, under the respected leadership of the learned Sheikh Aboubacar of Kiota, kept its distance from political power. With political liberalization, encounters between Sufis and Islamists have escalated.

Particularly vexing for the Sufis is a reform Islamist group called the Movement for the Suppression of Innovation and the Restoration of the Sunna of the Prophet (the Yan Izala) that spread from Northern Nigeria. The Yan Izala accuse the Sufis of worshipping shaykhs and other deviations from the teachings of Islam. Well financed, they have carried their proselytizing mission into Niger's urban areas – recruiting followers, establishing franco-arab schools, and building mosques. They have engaged the Sufis in a competition for modernity and Islamic knowledge that at times turns violent.⁶ The response of the Niass Tijani has been to say that the Yan Izala have no solid knowledge of Islam, and that many are unaware of the basic principles that underlie the Koran.⁷

These developments on the religious front run counter to the corporatist model of political life promoted by Niger's political class. Corporatism is a system of interest representation in which units organized into noncompetitive categories are authorized, licensed or created by the state. Rooted in notions of societal harmony and the interdependent functions of an organic whole, it offers an alternative to both the competitive pluralist norm of liberalism and the class conflict premise of Marxism. My earlier work on the culture of politics in Niger has documented how corporatist forms of interest representation have dominated political imagination and influenced the structure of political institutions since 1970.⁸ In 2003 the government promulgated a Decree that called for the establishment of a corporatist style National Islamic Council (NIC) that would function in an advisory role to the state.⁹ Tijani religious leaders support this initiative as a possible solution to religious conflict and a credible alternative to the creation of an Islamic state.

Niger's Tijani are now shoring up their situation as the “established dominant actors”¹⁰ in the religious field by seeking positions in new participatory political structures of the state. They are active at every level of government. Confident of their CVs and their superior mastery of Islamic knowledge and jurisprudence, they talk about the national-level NIC as an arena in which legal reforms in the areas of family law and inheritance can be crafted in ways that do not violate basic tenets of Islamic teaching. At the local level, Mamma Kiota's eldest daughter recently won a seat as a city councilor in Kiota. And officers in the Tijani women's association, the *Jamayyat Nassirat Dine*, are expanding their membership by setting up women's groups that parallel the administrative structures of Niger's local government down to the neighborhood level.

In fieldwork conducted this summer, I did 18 life history interviews with Tijani women leaders in Kiota and Niamey. In every case, the respondent took *empowerment* to mean that her life, in its public and domestic spheres, would be governed by Islamic principles. Thus, among other

things, this study will contribute a gendered analysis to the debate on Islam and modernity in West Africa.

¹ John S. Dryzek, "Political Inclusion and the Dynamics of Democratization," *The American Political Science Review*, 90/3 (September 1996): 475-486.

² Niger National Census, 1998.

³ Maïkoréma Zakari, "La tijaniyya au Niger," *MuKara Sani*, Revue de l'Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines, Université Abdou Moumouni, Vol. 9, Fascicules 1-2 (1998) : 33-45.

⁴ In using Bourdieu's field theory, I am building on the work of Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition*, (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2003). See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

⁵ In Senegal, the Tijaniyya have split between the Ba-Niass, headquartered in Kaolack, and the Sy lineage of Tivouane. See Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson, ed., *La Tijaniyyah-Une confrérie musulmane a la conquête de l'Afrique* (Khartala, 2000) and Triaud and Robinson, *Le temps des marabouts : Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française, 1880-1960* (Karthala, 1997).

⁶ Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria*, Conclusion, pp. 227-252.

⁷ Zakari, "La Tijaniyya au Niger," pp. 43-45.

⁸ Pearl T. Robinson, "Niger: Anatomy of a "Neotraditional Corporatist State," *Comparative Politics*, 24/1 (October 1991): 1-20; Robinson, "The National Conference Phenomenon in Francophone Africa," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 36/3 (July 1994): 575-610; and Robinson, "Democratization: Understanding the Relationship between Regime Change and the Culture of Politics," *African Studies Review*, 31/1 (April 1994): 39-67.

⁹ Décret N°2003-313/PRN/MI/D du 14 novembre 2003 portant création, composition, attributions et fonctionnement du Conseil Islamique du Niger.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie* (Paris : Minuit, 1984), pp. 113-21.