

The Tijaniyya Tariqa in Cape Town

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This article is a summary of my Masters Dissertation for the University of Cape Town. The study focuses on a very recent phenomenon in Cape Town, which is the first of its kind in the field of West African *turuq* in the city. Therefore, the conclusions are mainly descriptive and should be seen as preliminary, as they may develop in other directions as the Tijaniyya becomes more established in the years to come.

The Tijaniyya *tariqa* has been present in South Africa, particularly in Cape Town, since the end of apartheid in 1994, with the coming of West African migrants, predominantly from Senegal, into the country. Most Muslim immigrants to South Africa that come from West Africa are men, have secondary education and are involved in trade. Francophone immigrants from countries such as Senegal are small in numbers but sociologically significant, since their entrepreneurial activities give them an importance disproportionate to their numbers. They are mainly urban, enterprising and culturally distinguishable, and prefer inner city neighborhoods; some come from rural areas but are supported by networks like the Tijaniyya. The Tijaniyya affiliation is very important to such migrants as it gives them a network of contacts and support, but more importantly, moral and spiritual guidance in a foreign land.

The first Tijani *zawiya* in Cape Town was formally established by Shaykh Hassan Cissé in Guguletu in 2002. He has traveled extensively bringing Islam to many people. In Cape Town, during his visit hundreds of people, mainly black South Africans entered Islam. That year marked a flourishing of the Tijaniyya in Cape Town, as his presence inspired many to join the *tariqa* and brought Tijanis together through his spiritual guidance and blessings. The Tijani *zawiya* is located in a simple white brick house in Guguletu that serves all the needs of the community, from housing for their *muqaddam* and guests, to accommodating their *madrasa* and of course, for daily prayers and *dhikr* gatherings. Shaykh Hassan's *muqaddam* in Cape Town, Shaykh Abubakr from Rwanda, a doctor by profession, left a prestigious job in a university in Senegal to dedicate himself entirely to the Tijani disciples in Cape Town. He now lives in the *zawiya*, subsisting on the charity of the Tijani disciples, whom he leads on the Way, while also attracting more people to the Tijaniyya with his presence.

The success of the Tijaniyya in attracting people to Islam as well as to their path can be attributed to several factors. In contrast, the failures of *da'wa* organizations can be traced to their lack of unity, ignorance of black African cultures, inability to speak a local black language, the lack of follow up Islamic education, and the conflicts with 'established' Muslim communities; and of course in the past, included the many obstacles of apartheid. On the other hand, the Tijaniyya offers an Islamic education in their *madrasa*, providing the practical knowledge and support people need to maintain their faith. The *zawiya* becomes a home to many in difficult social circumstances, making the *tariqa* a way of life; and for many, its black leadership and African background has a strong appeal. Tijanis are not seen as outsiders imposing an 'Indian or Malay Islam' and are not dependent on the 'Indian' or 'Malay' communities for financial support. The Tijaniyya also plays a vital role in integrating black Muslims from the townships with Muslims from other wealthier areas, as well as people from

different racial and cultural backgrounds, an issue vitally important in South Africa today. Thus, the *tariqa* practically exemplifies the non-racial, non-nationalistic basis of Islam. Its success points to the importance of building alternative leadership structures in black communities for their own self-empowerment, and offers Islam as symbol of a new or alternative identity in the townships.

The question of identity in South Africa today is intimately linked to issues of race and is quite important to many Tijanis. Although according to the Tijani *muqaddamin*, the goal is to see everyone as the same, independently of race and based only on their spiritual qualities. However, the realities of life in the Cape makes the matter much more complex for many South African Tijanis. For black disciples, the *tariqa* is particularly appealing because of its black African roots and leadership, making them feel at home and giving them a sense of pride as black Muslims with a rich Islamic history and removing any complex of inferiority because of their 'late' entrance into Islam. For 'Malay' and 'Indian' Tijanis, the *tariqa* is also especially appealing because it has brought them into close contact with both black South Africans and blacks from around the continent with whom they had little or no contact before. They consider their local Islamic community too enclosed and say that the Tijaniyya brings them out of their limited ethnic circle, as well as giving them a sense of identity as African Muslims and not having to connect with a remote ancestral land. In a sense, it liberates them from the legacy of apartheid giving them the opportunity to meet people from all over the world and of other races in their own country. On the other hand, Senegalese members of the Tijaniyya have experienced xenophobia in one way or another since arriving in South Africa, but feel that both black and colored South African Tijanis open up to them without prejudice. They strongly feel that the *tariqa* changes people's attitudes through spirituality.

Thus, the Tijaniyya *tariqa* in Cape Town naturally exemplifies the characteristics and complexities of an 'African Muslim' identity. In its very brief history in South Africa, spirituality in the Tijaniyya is an important force that 'normalizes' race relations: it brings people from radically different ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds together; it gives confidence to those who have been historically oppressed; and it opens the doors of Africa to South African Muslims. The Tijaniyya does not impose from the outside an 'African' culture nor does it render black South African Muslims invisible. Instead, the *tariqa* is itself rooted in Africa and offers African leadership as well as the ideal opportunity for Muslims from all backgrounds to come together. Racism and prejudice can only be effectively combated through true understanding and constant interaction. The Tijaniyya *tariqa* in Cape Town uniquely offers this opportunity.

However, in spite of the importance of issues of race and identity, Tijanis in Cape Town stressed that the spiritual aspect of the *tariqa* was the most important characteristic of the Tijaniyya. For most, finding the *tariqa* was a very personal spiritual journey and their main focus and enjoyment is the *dhikr*, as well as receiving an education, both initiatic and Islamic in general. The spiritual method of the Tijaniyya, as described by *The Handbook: Tariqa Tijaniyya*, compiled expressly for South African disciples, like that of many other *turuq*, consists of the *wird* (asking Allah for forgiveness, offering prayers upon the Prophet and reciting the Islamic testimony of Faith) and remembering Allah as often as possible with *dhikr* (the invocation of litanies or one or more Divine Names). The goal is to develop an

increasing awareness of the presence of Allah and to slowly gain control over one's passions and desires; the passionate ego must disappear in order to let the spiritual Heart prevail. In the words of Cape Town's Tijani leader, *wilaya*, educating the heart to make it ready to host Allah, is the most important teaching of the Tijaniyya. The Shaykh is also regarded as crucial for the spiritual advancement of the disciple, guiding the *murid* in the path of *tarbiya*, by purifying the soul, but always within the bounds of the *Shari'a*, the orthodox framework of Islam.

In conclusion, as can be seen from this study, Tijanis in Cape Town keep away from controversies and feel that all Tijanis are brothers, independently of their race, origin or particular affiliation with one branch or another of the *tariqa*. They also regard other *turuq* as following a Path among many others to reach the same goal, thus questioning the academic view of the 'exclusivity' of the Tijaniyya. The order in Cape Town shows more signs of continuity with other *turuq* than of rupture with the past; the spirit of tolerance is present in all its manifestations. Similarly, although the history of the Tijaniyya *tariqa* may have been marked by a great *jihad* and political controversies in Senegal, its spread today beyond those borders has little to do with these extraneous factors. Instead, the spiritual dimension of the Way, the importance the order places on disseminating an ideal of behavior and piety, coupled with its bringing Islam to other parts of the world is much more significant. More specifically, when looking at the *tariqa* from the inside, one finds these aspects underlined by Tijanis themselves. One of the Tijaniyya *tariqa*'s main functions has been to bring the Islam of Africa to Cape Town, internationalizing it and bringing its local leaders into contact with a network of Muslims that come from different ethnic backgrounds. As the Tijanis themselves have remarked, the *tariqa* provides the opportunity for people of different "races" and geographic backgrounds in South Africa to meet and respect each other and to understand 'African Islam'. But more importantly, Tijanis in Cape Town emphasize the appeal of a Way designed to deepen their Islam and purify their hearts to bring them closer to Allah.

Quotes:

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