Medina Gounass is an isolated religious community situated in a remote area of Senegal. Until the 1980s, the leader of this branch of the Tijan tariqa refused all contact with the outside world. This isolation, as well as the intervention of the worldly authorities inevitable. Today, the community of Medina Gounass is, like so many Sufi orders in Senegal, courted by the state elite.

Ahmed Tijan Be, current caliph of Medina Gounass

Located some 85 km south of the regional capital Tambacounda in eastern Senegal, Medina Gounass is one of the largest communities of the Haute Casamance region. Its inhabitants, mainly of Hal Pular (Toucouleur) and Peul origin, live in the many quarters of the community. A modern road system, constructed at the beginning of the 1980s, just after the ascension of the first caliph, is centred around the huge mosque. Its impressive minaret can hardly be missed upon entering the village by one of the dusty bush roads.

Ahmed Tijan Be, usually referred to as the rehman, is the current caliph of the community. He is the spiritual guide of the numerous followers living in Medina Gounass as well as abroad. His leadership extends to nearly all domains of everyday life in the community. He is both the politico-religious leader and judge. People choose to live in the community because they feel that his 'sainthood to God (wleeyo) is beneficial. Others, living elsewhere in Senegal or abroad, pay visits from time to time to Medina Gounass. Nowadays, the adepts have photographs, sold in the local shops, through which they experience the veneration of the thimoo.

While walking the streets of Medina Gounass, one notices immediately the absence of women. It is stated that women should stay at home and rarely go out. If they do, they should be veiled — even in the confines of the compound. Women often gather to listen to the words of Thieno Amadou Seydou Ba, the community's founder who died in 1980, recorded on tape.

The foundation of the community

Thieno Amadou Seydou Ba founded Medina Gounass in 1935. He was originally from the Fouta Tofa, a region located in the middle valley of the Senegal River. After several years of travel and mainly in the southern Casamance region, he finally settled in Medina Gounass with a handful of disciples. He preached the word of the wind, a litany of prayers brought to Senegal from Morocco in the 19th century by the Hal Pular militant El Hadji Oumar Tall. At the outset, Medina Gounass was not more than a simple residential centre for followers, connected to the private home of the thimoo. But it began to develop rapidly when large crowds of followers, mostly flocing the hajj manifestations of colonialism or the dictatorial regimes in some parts of the subregion (e.g. Sekou Toure’s Guinee-Conakry), settled in the community. While the circle of disciples expanded, the thimoo demonstrated and an extraordinary level of piousness, to the extent that he was able to transform a small group of adepts into a self-conscious religious community, with an elaborated structure and a firm religious base in the shari'a.

Under the guidance of the thimoo, Medina Gounass soon became a religious isolation. Contacts with the French colonial state and, after 1960, the independent state of Senegal, were limited to the payment of taxes and the commercialization of cash crops. In one of the few published articles on this religious community, the thimoo stressed his fight against innovations (bid’a) and took a firm line on the implementation of the shari'a. Unlike other rural communities, where the violent protest against the secular state and its representatives made their way to Medina Gounass. President Abdou Diouf sent a delegation to ‘greet and encourage’ the thimoo and to wish him and the attendants success and a ‘perfect spiritual communion’. Missionary and other visits that have marked the recent history of Medina Gounass, preclude the end of the isolationist posture of this Sufi order.

Beyond the State

It is true that with these developments, a degree of belonging emerged in this religious community. Nevertheless, the main internal problems, which continued during the 1990s, Medina Gounass has not lost all of its original appeal to a still large rural community — approximately 14,000 inhabitants — guided by Ahmed Tijan Ba. So far, no official grants constructed in Medina Gounass, are yet to appear.

The benefits of success, measured by the financial resources pouring into the community from abroad clearly bypass the state, in contrast to the income generated by cash-crop cultivation which had to be sold directly to the state-controlled companies.

The benefits of success, measured by the impressive housing facilities some of the migrants constructed in Medina Gounass, are entirely attributed to the thimoo. Considerable sums of money are given to him in gratitude and in order to ensure further financial support. Outside interference, whether in the form of state interference or in the hands of the thimoo. They learn to memorize portions of the Qur’an and the basic ritual obligations. In this part of the country, the traditional learning centres are not challenged by state institutions.

The arrodisement de Medina Gounass traditionally has an extremely low degree of modernization (4.2%) in 1990. This points not only to the difficulties of implementing educational policies but also to the importance people attach to Muslim education. Faced with a situation in which crowds of unemployed (but often well-educated) youth dwell the streets of Medina Gounass, parents feel that Qur’anic education is much more effective for transmitting Islamic knowledge and moral values to their children. In this regard, the education provided by a Muslim community that acts as a centre-society, is very much compatible with the social and economic circumstances of contemporary Senegalese society.

Notes
5. Dr. Ed van Hoven is a post-doctoral researcher at the School of Asian, African, and American Studies, University of Leiden, the Netherlands.