The expansion of Islam in northwest Africa has been very much associated with the widespread of brotherhood movements (turuq). Religious and educational practices as well as collectivist socio-political imprints of these movements, the political and economic influence of which has been — and remains — decisive in vast regions from the Maghreb to the Sudan to Senegal. Recent developments, however, indicate an increase in power of a neo-fundamentalist Islam originating in the Middle East, which presents itself as a reflex to the ideas and practices developed by the local versions of tasawwuf (Muslim mysticism) organized as brotherhoods.

The following proposes to underline more particularly the ‘gender’ dimension of local Muslim practices as it manifests itself both in ‘tradition’ and in certain recent challenges to it. The focus is limited to the Moorish society of Mauritania, although it is most likely that the transformations experienced by this society have affected its neighbouring societies in an analogous way. Although it is not necessary to offer a general presentation of Muslim brotherhoods or the tasawwuf as such; it should be noted that the brotherhoods are religious organizations centered on the person of the shaykh, a master and educator par excellence (muqaddam) whose authority is part of a chain (sil sila) of authorities leading back to the Prophet of Islam. He is perceived by his disciples (khalûd, murîd) as a guide, an intercessor who must be served and obeyed without reserve until he leads them, his disciples, through the chosen trials to the point of mastering ‘the way’ (tarîq). They can then enter a state of enfronlement, leave the ‘guide’ as they now hold their own title of ‘master’ (shaykhî) or ‘licensed’ (muqaddam) and are authorized to guide others. In practice, the transmission of material and symbolic capital (barraki) associated with the direction of the tarîq is generally carried out by the descendants of the founders, not so much but not without competition and dissent amongst the various candidates of the in heritance.

In the Moorish territory, which has often constituted a place of transit and transmission of ideas and Eastern brotherhood organizations heading for Sub-Saharan Africa, the principal turuq comprise the following: the Qâddîyya in its nîsîra variant, one of whose inventors was the Moroccan Mârîân âbû-Nâûbât al-Mûzitrânî (d. 1981), the movement’s great Saharan renewer of the 18th century, and finally the tiyûdîyya, the dissemination of which in the Moorish territory and its confines is accredited especially to Abu Shâykh Muhammad al-Îhâlî al-Îlâwî (d.1930)’. An enthralled in its particular of ramifications emerged out of these main brotherhoods, associating individual initiatives, inheritance quarrels, tribal usûliyya (group solidarity), and even political allegiances. The search for affinity manifests itself most notably in the creation of centres that often become places of instruction, agricultural production, and commercial exchange. Formally, the turuq appear as miniature republics. On the other hand, a clear model of religion: they reduplicate the initial messen- ger (the Prophet Muhammad) with a second messenger who ‘descends’ from him — e.g. Sheikh Bûnî Sûzî, the project, by the shaykh nûrî, to whom a number of brotherhood founders/ transmitters are linked — and often ‘repeats’ the key traits of his biography. This is essentially a male af- fair: the founders and their ‘chains’, the muqaddamî, and the successors counting no women amongst them.

Nonetheless, women are not absent from the brotherhood movements. Islam extract- ed from the common basis of the Sudan ese existing monothelisms the theme of the female temptress and it tends to regulate with a certain ease the contacts and relations between men and women. In addition, Islam is profoundly suspicious of celibacy. Albeit in vain, the mystical propaedeutic ex- periment of the refusal of all genes, the polemic that this incited should be recognized as a debit in the anti-Moorish society, all physical contact, in a certain sense in this type of context, did not remain without reaction in the face of these threats. They thus promulgated traditional rules of male-female contact in Moorish society, founded on kinship rela- tions. This position taken by the tiyûdîn/shaykh, whose community already had a reputation of non-conformism with respect to male-fe- male relations, is not without demarcation by the Moorish religious estab- lishment. This position has also recently fed the stigmatizing discourse of certain for- mer members of Wuldan Sîdana ‘community, criticizing it adamantly for, amongst other things, the promiscuity (in its eyes scan- dalous) instituted amongst men and women. Wuldan Sidiana and his disciples did not re- main without reaction in the face of these threats. They thus authorized themselves to mark this ceremonious, specifically against their former companions who had renounced them and that they accused of being in the pay of Westernism. What can be concluded from the above- mentioned observations in terms of the evolution of the Moorish society andits brotherhood movements and in a larger sense within Moorish society in its entirety? Even if the communities mentioned are de- mographically small, it is appropriate to un- define the diversity and the non-conformi- ty to a certain representation of Sûunî ‘or- thodoxy’ that this non-conformity express- es and the polemic that this incited in the Moorish society. The recent upheavals experienced by this society (mas- sive sedentarization of former nomads, un- precedented swelling of the urban popula- tion, substantial progress of elementary reli- gious education, etc.) tend to modify the effects of the individual adherence to a particu- lar, still on and out of which it is based. In the context of the nomads, the residential units (en- campments), generally small in size, were constructed, above all, based on tribal kin- ship. The tent was not very conducive to keeping women inside. In fact their pres- ence in the encampment appeared to be indi- spensable: it was a sort of associate their farsightedness in the religious and educational practices. 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