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Charismatic discipleship: a Sufi woman and the divine mission of development in Senegal

Joseph Hill

Developing women as religious mission

In 2005, Rokhaya Thiam was the forty-four-year-old head of midwifery at a hospital in Dakar's northern suburbs when a series of spiritual experiences led her into the Fayḍa Tijāniyya ('Tijānī Flood') Sufi Islamic movement. In a dream, the Fayḍa's founding saint Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (1900–75) – better known to disciples as 'Baye', or 'Father' in Wolof (Wol.) – approached her and confirmed that he had authorized the leader she was considering visiting to initiate her into Sufi mystical knowledge. She approached this leader and received the mystical initiation of *tarbiya* (Arabic/Ar.) – the distinctive spiritual training process through which Baye's followers come to 'know God' (Hill 2007; Seesemann 2011). After *tarbiya*, Rokhaya and several other 'Taalibe Baay' (Wolof spelling, 'disciple of Baye/father') co-workers at the hospital formed a small *daayira* (Wol.), or circle of disciples. Like most Taalibe Baay *daayira*s springing up around Dakar, this mixed-gender *daayira* met weekly to chant *dhikr* (Ar.), or remembrance of God.

Two years later, Rokhaya Thiam realized that 'our needs went beyond a *daayira*', which they had created 'just for meeting, chanting *dhikr*, talking'.[1] She approached laboratory technician and fellow *daayira* member Youma Konaté to discuss forming 'a large group of women and call it the Association Mame Astou Diankha'.[2] They would name the association after Baye's mother to spread awareness of her. The two soon enlisted two other female co-workers and then several other men and women. Although the association often presents itself as women helping women, Rokhaya Thiam told me that 'in Baye's house, there are no men or women', echoing Baye's teachings on transcending gender through experiencing divine unity.

The association's leaders went to seek the support of Ndey Aïda Niasse, Baye's daughter, named after his mother.[3] Rokhaya told her:

> It won't be an *association* that just meets to chant *dhikr*. Rather, it will meet to be able to work toward the *development* of the community [*péey bi*] as Taalibe Baay, so that through our work, we will be active in *health*, we will be active in *education*, we will be active in

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[1] Interview with Rokhaya Thiam, 10 June 2010.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] 'Ndey' means mother, suggesting that she is named after a parent's mother, while 'Aïda' is one Wolof variation of the Arabic name ʿĀʾisha, from which 'Astou' also derives.

> *finance*, and everything, so that among the fellow female disciples among us … those who are able can help those who are unable.[4]

With support from the Fayḍa's key leaders, the association organized free medical consultations throughout Senegal. They gradually expanded to organize micro-credit and other economic projects. Rokhaya Thiam's professional career has advanced in pace with Association Mame Astou Diankha's (AMAD's) expansion. In 2010, when I first interviewed her and several AMAD members, she still oversaw midwifery at the Abdoul Aziz Sy Hospital in Parcelles Assainies, a densely populated suburb north of Dakar.[5] When I interviewed her again in 2014, she had left the hospital to expand her nearby private women's health clinic, which she also describes as integral to her religious mission.

The interviews my research associates and I conducted with Rokhaya Thiam and several other AMAD participants were part of a larger project since 2009 examining the emergence of prominent women leaders in the Fayḍa in Senegal (see Hill 2010; 2014; 2016b). This project continues ethnographic research with the movement since 2001. All interviews were in Wolof, Senegal's lingua franca and nearly all interviewees' first language. While over twenty of our interviewees were formally appointed spiritual guides (Ar.: *muqaddama*s), Rokhaya Thiam has no formal religious appointment. Instead, she has established herself as a quasi-religious authority through her personal philanthropy and by leading 'development' projects. I interviewed many Taalibe Baay who mentioned her as a model disciple and described witnessing or being beneficiaries of some of her projects. This article contextualizes Rokhaya Thiam's personal narrative as illustrating what I call 'charismatic discipleship'.

With her singular career path and renown in the Fayḍa community, Rokhaya Thiam is far from a typical ethnographic subject. However, this is precisely how she illustrates the paradoxical generalization of singularity that is charismatic discipleship. Since beginning my research in the Senegalese Fayḍa community in 2001, I have seen the community grow rapidly, especially among young, urban men and women attracted by its promise of a direct, individualized experience of God. For a growing number of disciples, discipleship entails not waiting for leaders' instructions but discovering and realizing one's unique, God-given mission. Adapting a phrase from Foucault (1997b), one might speak of a 'hermeneutic of mission', a process of examining signs – through dreams, mystical states, and everyday experiences – through which Baye reveals and realizes one's mission.

At first glance, charismatic disciples may seem to reflect a neoliberalization of religion and discipleship. Contrasting with the usual presentation of the disciple who waits passively for instructions from leaders, they approach discipleship as an entrepreneurial endeavour to discover and realize a unique mission. Like Pentecostals in Africa (see Freeman 2012; Lindhardt 2014), a growing number

[4]Interview 10 June 2010. Throughout this article, italicized words indicate French and Arabic words used in a Wolof interview.

[5]Cheikh Baye Thiam interviewed her and several other AMAD officers on my behalf in March 2010. I interviewed her and several AMAD officers on 10 June 2010, with assistance from El Hadji Abdoulaye Bitèye. I again interviewed Rokhaya Thiam individually on 16 August 2014 with assistance from Alioune Seck. My wife, Marwa Fikry, also attended this third interview.

of Taalibe Baay cast their religious missions in neoliberal terms such as development, NGOs, and individual self-reliance. As many anthropologists have shown (see below), far from 'secularizing' Africa as widely predicted, modernity and neoliberal hegemony have reshaped and often intensified religion and the occult. Discussing Pentecostalism in Nigeria, Ruth Marshall (2009) acknowledges that global conditions such as neoliberalism have favoured certain religious practices, yet critiques tendencies to reduce such religious practices to convergence with, resistance to, or attempts to understand neoliberalism. Pentecostalism, she says, provides a 'specific form of individualism' with 'individual disciplines and techniques of self-fashioning' (*ibid*.: 9). Drawing on Michel Foucault, Marshall describes Pentecostalism as a 'prescriptive regime' that 'produces new subjects, in the double sense of being subjected *to* and the subject *of* a practice' (*ibid*.: 11). Similarly, Saba Mahmood (2005) has approached a piety movement in Egypt as a regime of disciplinary practice through which Muslim women fashion themselves as religious subjects and oppose mainstream secularization.

Charismatic disciples such as Rokhaya Thiam likewise fashion themselves through, for example, daily Sufi meditative practice (Ar.: *wird*), individual and collective *dhikr* recitations, and listening to live and recorded sermons. Yet they are simultaneously subject to various other kinds of institutions and discourses with their own logics and power relations. I therefore describe these disciples as 'hybrid religious subjects' (Hill 2012) who situate religious practice between multiple discursive and institutional regimes. Here, 'hybridity' refers not to the cultural mixing or liminality resulting from living between two identities (Bhabha 1994; Nederveen Pieterse 2001). Rather, my conception derives from Bakhtin's (1981) description of 'hybrid' or 'double-voiced' utterances that 'refract' alien voices and world views into one's speech. Hybrid language, I suggest, often reflects a speaker's subjecthood to multiple regimes with contrasting approaches to personhood, agency, knowledge, and moral order. Charismatic disciples such as Rokhaya Thiam refract semiotic and material resources from a neoliberal regime towards projects grounded in the Fayḍa's mystical approach to knowledge, authority and personhood. Terms such as 'development' and 'individual' thus become 'bivalent' (Woolard 1998), simultaneously part of 'two symbolic systems' and thereby mobilizing contrasting regimes of knowledge and authority.

Thus, Taalibe Baay's increasingly individualized approach to religion, although partly enabled by neoliberal transformations, is not reducible to neoliberalism's individualistic subjectivity. Taalibe Baay often describe their mission and actions as originating not in themselves but in Baye, an all-encompassing spiritual presence who posthumously assimilates disciples to himself. In contrast to notions of 'dividual' or 'partible' persons comprising parts from different origins (Strathern 1988), Taalibe Baay approach religious agency as located in a larger totality of which the person is a visible manifestation. Disciples embed hegemonic global discourses of 'development' into locally relevant notions of progress and change. Ultimately, I ask whether, rather than exceptions that crop up in the still-enchanted margins of disenchanted modernity, such hybridities may be inseparable from neoliberal subjecthood. That is, I ask: how is any neoliberal subject also shaped by other regimes of power and knowledge? How do subjects continually resignify neoliberal power to serve non-neoliberal ends?

Individualized Islam in Senegal

Discipleship as an individual initiative – especially one carried out by and for women – contrasts with the picture painted by much of the academic literature on Islamic authority in Senegal. Around 96 per cent of Senegal's population is Muslim (République du Sénégal 2013: 300). Of those Muslims, over 90 per cent identify as adherents of some 'brotherhood' (*confrérie*) growing out of the Sufi tradition, including 58 per cent who identify as followers of the Tijānī order (République du Sénégal 2015). Due to the enormous influence of Sufi leaders – often called 'marabouts' – secular state actors and politicians since colonial times have courted their support in order to influence the masses (Copans 1980; Coulon 1981; Villalón 1995). Many accounts inaccurately describe these 'brotherhoods' as formally excluding women (for example, Cruise O'Brien 1971: 85–6; Creevey 1991; Bop 2005). Some have attributed Senegalese Islamic leaders' influence to disciples' 'blind obedience' (for example, Behrman 1970) arising from the belief that leaders are intercessors with God. Others have characterized disciples as more rational, offering Islamic leaders their allegiance in exchange for material benefits and collective representation (Cruise O'Brien 1971; Coulon 1981; Villalón 1995). To many commentators, President Abdou Diouf's electoral loss in 2000 suggested that Islamic leaders were losing political influence due to disciples' disobedience to leaders' political decrees. However, Sufi leaders have continued to influence public life, albeit often in more subtle ways (Audrain 2004; Diop *et al*. 2000; Villalón 2015).

The doctrine that a disciple must show absolute obedience to the shaykh – like a cadaver in the hands of the mortician, says an ancient Sufi adage – is essential to performances of discipleship (Cruise O'Brien 2007). Yet discipleship is more complex than the question of obedience versus resistance. Disciples in a global era are subject to, and therefore shaped by, multiple regimes of power and knowledge. Unsurprisingly, given neoliberalism's global hegemony, discipleship in Senegal sometimes looks strikingly neoliberal, emphasizing individual industriousness, 'development' and entrepreneurship (Hill 2016b).

'Neoliberalism' here refers to the theory that progress and well-being result from 'liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills' through ensuring 'strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey 2005: 2). As the globally dominant political-economic regime today, neoliberalism is felt in the global South through structural adjustment and 'development' programmes promoted by institutions including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. International institutions have globalized the idea of 'developing women' by requiring all sponsored projects to follow the 'gender and development' paradigm (Rathgeber 1990). The microcredit industry has globalized the ideal of the individual woman as self-reliant entrepreneur (Karim 2008; Rankin 2001).

Western-driven neoliberal policies have profoundly transformed lives in Africa. Yet the result has not been simply to 'neoliberalize', 'Westernize' or 'secularize' Africans. Structural adjustment programmes have hollowed out state programmes and infrastructure, undermined social and economic networks, eroded formal paths to success, and thereby devalued state-centric education. Generalized precarity and distrust of state elites and politics have led youth to seek success and prestige in new, often informal forms of ingenuity and improvisation (Banégas and Warnier 2001; Diouf 2003; Röschenthaler and Schulz 2016).

Despite predictions of the modern world's inexorable 'disenchantment' (Weber 1978 [1922]: 506) and 'secularization' (Gauchet 1997), religious observance not only continues as a social foundation but has often become increasingly public, especially throughout the global South (Kepel 1994). Religious practices have borrowed neoliberal language and forms even while undermining putative divisions between public and private, sacred and profane (Comaroff 2014: 224; Rudnyckyj 2011). Malian Muslim saints, Benjamin Soares (2005) shows, have become 'free floating sanctifiers', their spiritual power commodified in a 'fee-for-service' religious marketplace.

Religion increasingly converges with entrepreneurship. High-profile 'religious entrepreneurs' have proliferated in Muslim (Bava 2003; Kane 2003; Soares 2005) and Christian (Ukah 2015) contexts. Religious movements promote economic entrepreneurship as a religious virtue, including Senegalese Mouride commercial networks (Sall 2014) and Pentecostal churches preaching the 'gospel of prosperity' (Freeman 2012; Lindhardt 2014). Although charismatic discipleship often combines religious leadership with economic initiatives, it is distinct in reimagining discipleship itself as an entrepreneurial initiative.

As liberal democratic politics and the formal economy fail to deliver on their promises, religious communities stand as a last bastion of meaning and sociality. In Senegal under President Abdoulaye Wade (2000–12), liberal economic reforms fronted massive pillaging of public resources while youth unemployment rose (Faye 2013). After supporting Macky Sall's election in 2012, many youths soon concluded that little had changed. For many of these youths, Islam remains a source of hope and stability. However, what counts as authentic Islamic knowledge and authority is increasingly contested. Religion appears less as an inheritance than as a trail one must blaze for oneself. The Islamic scene throughout West Africa has diversified as new charismatic Sufi leaders (Masquelier 2009; Schulz 2003; Soares 2007; 2010) and pietistic reform movements (Augis 2005; Janson 2014; Kane 2003) compete over who faithfully represents authentic Islam. Since the 1990s, across Islamic movements, women have gained visibility as leaders and public icons of piety (Augis 2014; Frede 2014; Hill 2010; Janson 2014; LeBlanc 2014; Masquelier 2009; Schulz 2008; 2012). Women have simultaneously moved into leading roles in Pentecostal churches throughout Africa (Soothill 2014). The Fayḍa Tijāniyya is one of many religious movements that have thrived in this era of social dislocation through providing tools for individual self-realization, community, trusted authority, and opportunities for women's advancement.

Routinized leaders and charismatic disciples

Saintly West African Sufi leaders are often described as examples of Weberian 'charismatic authority', which emerges in 'moments of distress' (Weber 1978 [1922]: 1111) before progressively routinizing through transmission to successors (Cruise O'Brien and Coulon 1988; Schulz 2003; Soares 2005). On one level, this describes the Fayḍa, whose hierarchy officially centres around Baye's heirs. Dramatic performances of devotion to Shaykh Ibrahim's descendants are central to discipleship and community. However, at another level, charisma in

the Fayḍa is largely located in the rank-and-file disciples who initiate projects claiming direct inspiration from Baye. When the Fayḍa appeared in 1929, its distinctive trait was its universal promise of direct, ecstatic knowledge of God through the transformative process of *tarbiya* (Hill 2007; Seesemann 2011). Yet the Fayḍa only became a mass urban youth movement starting around 2000. Like the charismatic Christian movements that have simultaneously proliferated throughout Africa (Freeman 2012; Lindhardt 2014; Marshall 2009), the Fayḍa offers every follower an individualized, charismatic connection to God.

To realize one's charismatic potential, one must submit oneself to a spiritual hierarchy by receiving *tarbiya* from someone in Baye's spiritual lineage. *Tarbiya* involves receiving and repeating a sequence of litanies for weeks or months until one experiences the dissolution of the self (Ar.: *fanāʾ al-nafs*) and the unity of all things in God. Although this process may resemble 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1997a) used to cultivate an 'ethical disposition' (Mahmood 2005), Taalibe Baay do not describe this transformation as a result of bodily practice. Rather, they describe God – through Baye – directly transforming them into a 'knower of God' (Ar.: *ʿārif bi-ʾLlāh*) and into a manifestation of Baye's own 'presence' (Ar.: *ḥaḍra*), a term often used to describe the collectivity of disciples. Several disciples recounted feeling or seeing Baye during *tarbiya* as he effected this transformation. Some outsiders interpret this fixation on Baye as showing slavish and fanatical devotion. Yet, for disciples, Baye is not only their direct conduit to God but the one who acts through them.

In an era that generalizes crisis while individualizing responsibility, the generalization and personalization of charisma in movements such as the Fayḍa and charismatic Christianity is fitting. However, as Ruth Marshall has pointed out in her account of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, identifying the historical conditions that favour certain religious discourses and practices is far from understanding what those discourses and practices mean to religious subjects (Marshall 2009).

Thus, if a neoliberal era has contributed to a 'personalization' of charisma, is the relevant notion of the 'person' the one assumed in liberal discourse? Several anthropologists have relativized liberal assumptions of the individual in Muslim contexts, showing how disciplinary practices enable non-liberal forms of subjectivity, agency and self-understanding (Asad 1993; 2000; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005). As productive as these interventions have been, situating agency in embodied discipline and habitus occludes ontologies that may apprehend personhood and agency differently. Participants in spirit possession, for example, may understand the self to be shaped partly by another being that gradually assimilates with the individual (Masquelier 2001). Building on Mauss (2000 [1925]), scholars of Melanesia have spoken of the 'partible person' or the 'dividual', a composite person who exchanges spiritual substance with other persons (Strathern 1988; Mosko 1992; see Werbner 2011 on an African context). Like European charismatic Christians discussed by Simon Coleman (2000: 205–6), Taalibe Baay stretch personhood and agency outward, apprehending the person as manifesting an 'expansive agency' that transcends the individual. This ontology presents a person's actions as simultaneously those of an individual and those of a larger entity.

Rokhaya Thiam resembles many charismatic disciples I have interviewed in approaching discipleship as a personal mission combining inspiration, creativity and initiative. Dozens of Taalibe Baay rappers told me of discovering their

mission to bring young people to God through lyrics they attribute to divine inspiration (Hill 2016a). In every neighbourhood of Dakar, rank-and-file disciples initiate religious associations (*daayira*s) and organize large religious meetings. Many open Islamic schools, clinics and mosques. Women have stepped into heretofore masculine roles as religious chanters and spiritual guides (Hill 2010; 2016b). Other women organize microcredit, vocational training and charitable programmes, adopting the organizational structures, discourses and activities prevalent in the NGO sphere.

'Our association does not just work in *daayira* matters – we are working in development'

A leading member of AMAD, a schoolteacher, explained during an interview in 2010:

> Our association does not just work in *daayira* matters – we are working in *development* – *development* of the community of disciples [*péey bi*] … We don't just work in religion [*diine*]. It's true that religion is a good thing for the community, but *development too* is good for the community.

AMAD organizers often speak of going beyond '*daayira*' activities centred on 'religion' (*diine*, from Ar.: *dīn*) to those of an 'association' concerned with 'development'. 'Development' is thus the realization of a religious mission.

Although often imagined as a secular concept, Western usages of 'development' descend from the marriage of Christian theological notions of historical progress to scientific notions of rational prediction (Asad 1993; Bornstein 2003). The colonial endeavour to 'improve' colonized peoples included missionary projects to spread the 'light' of Christian civilization. Many Christian and secular NGOs inherit similar attitudes (Bornstein 2002; 2003). Structural adjustment and other neoliberal policies shifted responsibility for social programmes from declining states to various non-state actors, including religious groups. In the 1990s, Paul Gifford noted an '"NGO-ization" of the mainline churches' (1994: 521), a process that has become even more pronounced among Pentecostal churches preaching the 'gospel of prosperity' (Freeman 2012). The same 'NGO-ization' process can be observed in Muslim contexts (Ghandour 2002; Kaag 2007). Although Muslims and Christians have long seen helping the poor as a religious obligation, 'charity' is increasingly giving way to 'development' projects that use modern institutional forms and techniques to transform individuals and society. Women in social welfare associations in Lebanon (Deeb 2006) and Egypt (Hafez 2011) approach development work as a specifically feminine exercise of Islamic piety.

Sufi leaders in Senegal have long been central to social welfare, even if informally. Beyond providing Islamic education, they redistribute a large part of the monetary and in-kind offerings (Ar.: *hadiyya*; Wol.: *àddiya*) they receive to the poor. Yet many of the formal Senegalese Islamic organizations working in education, social issues and healthcare have been founded independently of the major Sufi orders, often by anti-Sufi reformists (Renders 2002). Recently, Senegalese Shīʿī converts and Lebanese Shīʿī immigrants founded at least two NGOs that

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combine religious activities with socio-economic development (Leichtman 2015). The academic literature has made little mention of Sufi groups' involvement in 'development' organizations in Senegal or elsewhere.

Fayḍa leaders have long been known for involvement in social welfare and 'development'. Rüdiger Seesemann (2002) has discussed a Fayḍa shaykh in Sudan who implemented an innovative and successful youth rehabilitation programme within his Qurʾānic school between 1987 and 1994. Some major Fayḍa leaders have founded formally recognized NGOs. Shaykh Hassan Cissé, the highest-profile Fayḍa leader worldwide until his death in 2008, founded the African American Islamic Institute (AAII) in 1988. This international NGO focuses significantly on women's education and health. Terre Vivante, founded in 1993 by Al-Ḥājj wuld Mishrī, a Fayḍa shaykh in neighbouring Mauritania, similarly participates in the international secular NGO sphere as a religious mission to develop Mauritania (Hill 2012). Many of the dozens of local Taalibe Baay *daayira*s I have visited throughout Dakar have organized 'development' activities such as artisanal training for female disciples and microloans to disciples for chicken coops. Many of them had registered as '*groupements d'intérêt économique*', although none had attained NGO status.

Although some Muslims reject the notion of 'development' as a colonial legacy (Feldman 1997), others embed 'development' into alternative temporalities. Islamic economist Abdel Hamid al-Ghazali describes 'economic development' as 'a religious duty', tying development not to unilinear progress but to the fight against poverty mandated by Islam 'until the Day of Judgment' (quoted in Hafez 2011: 129). As a 'bivalent' (Woolard 1998) term, 'development' simultaneously mobilizes multiple regimes of discourse and power. A meeting I attended in 2005 entitled 'Islam, Women and Development' exemplified this bivalence. Although organized by a secular political party, the Rassemblement du Peuple led by Baye's son Mamoune Niasse, the meeting featured religious speeches by Fayḍa leaders (Hill 2011). Speakers annexed 'development' as a quintessentially Islamic project, insisting that Islamic principles – and not liberal Western principles – promoted women's well-being and social progress.

For AMAD members, 'development' is the concrete fulfilment of 'religion'. In 2010, the association and the hospital *daayira* were still intimately linked. Both were headquartered in Rokhaya Thiam's hospital apartment and comprised the same core members. When I revisited in 2014, Rokhaya Thiam told me that the *daayira* had been 'dissolved into the association' (*seey ci biir association bi*). Association members described the *daayira*'s displacement by a non-religious association not as a shift towards secularization but the realization of profoundly religious goals.

Founding the development association as a religious project

Rokhaya Thiam narrates AMAD's emergence from the *daayira* as the realization of a religious mission, which grew out of a deeply personal spiritual transformation that began with her *tarbiya* in 2005. Although her family vaguely identified with the same Tijānī Sufi order, Rokhaya Thiam describes growing up unaware of Baye. Her son went through *tarbiya* with Shaykh Mamour Insa Diop, a

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muqaddam in Dakar famous for having several prominent rapper followers. One day Rokhaya saw her son reciting the daily Tijānī *wird* and asked if he was crazy. But after talking to him and Taalibe Baay co-workers, she felt a desire to receive the *wird* as well.

A co-worker offered to take her and her daughter to Shaykh Mamour Insa. On their way, she told the taxi driver where she was going. He asked her if she was sure the person she was approaching for the *wird* had permission to give it. She answered: 'How should I know?' Although this question troubled her, she and her daughter received the *wird*. When Shaykh Mamour Insa asked if she also wanted *tarbiya*, she asked him what it was. He explained it to her, and she concluded that it sounded like a good thing. So she and her daughter began their *tarbiya* that day.

That night, without knowing what he looked like, she dreamed of Baye for the first and last time. In her dream, people gathered around a man they called 'Mawlānā[6] Shaykh Ibrahim'. This man handed a book to Shaykh Mamour Insa, saying it was his. She asked him if that meant that Shaykh Mamour Insa was the one authorized to give her the *wird*, and he said yes.

After *tarbiya*, Rokhaya Thiam approached her Taalibe Baay co-workers about founding a small *daayira*. They visited Baaba Lamin Niasse, Baye's son who represents the Fayḍa in Dakar, to ask for his blessing, and he named the *daayira* '*Aḥbāb Shaykh al-Islam*' ('The Beloved of the Shaykh of Islam [Ibrahim Niasse]'). Two years later, Rokhaya approached Youma Konaté about forming an association of Taalibe Baay women to organize development activities. Youma reported answering:

> 'So that's what you want?' I said. 'Well, it's already established – it has already happened. Yes! It seems as if you go to bed at night and Baye tells you get up and do this, and you just do it.' Because she is a soldier of Baye – one who has put Baye in her heart, body, and everything, to the point that that's all she does. That's all she thinks about. She has no other thoughts. There is no topic of conversation other than Baye Niasse, working for Baye Niasse.

Although Rokhaya Thiam did not recount dreams instructing her to found the association, Youma Konaté describes her as so entirely absorbed in Baye Niasse that it was *as if* Baye directly led her through dreams. If Baye is the initiator of her mission, it is as good as fulfilled. Rokhaya Thiam's perceived direct connection to Baye Niasse is crucial to the association's operation. Although association members often mention support from high-profile religious leaders, they attribute the association's vision and success to this direct connection to Baye.

When I mentioned that I was conducting research on *muqaddama*s (female spiritual guides), Youma Konaté laughed and pointed at Rokhaya Thiam, saying, 'She is our *muqaddam*.' Although Rokhaya Thiam is not actually a *muqaddama*, the sight of her surrounded by young collaborators resembles the sight of Dakar's new Taalibe Baay *muqaddama*s and their young disciples. She even wears the *malaḥfa*, the colourful, concealing body wrap that many *muqaddama*s have adopted from Mauritanian women. Just as *muqaddama*s exercise great influence

[6]'Our Lord', a title often used with Shaykh Ibrahim.

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through amplifying conventionally feminine behaviours such as motherhood, cooking and submissiveness (Hill 2010; 2014; 2016b), Rokhaya Thiam's influence grows out of the conventionally feminine work of midwifery. Yet also like *muqaddama*s, Rokhaya Thiam sometimes invokes the mystical transcendence of gender.

Rokhaya Thiam and other association members alternately describe the association as a religious project by and for Taalibe Baay women and as a development project for humanity regardless of religion or gender. In 2014, Rokhaya Thiam described the association's primary emphasis as 'the *promotion* of Taalibe Baay *women*'. She described her goal as 'getting to the point where every last Taalibe Baay woman is active in *development*'. Women's economic development, she insisted, was a religious necessity: how will women be able to pay the fare to attend religious meetings or pay the monthly *daayira* dues if they have no income?

Thus, when Rokhaya Thiam and other association leaders visited a series of leaders to ask for their authorization and guidance, these visits were simultaneously performances of submission and calls for support for their own inspired vision. After visiting Rokhaya Thiam's personal spiritual guide, Shaykh Mamour Insa Diop, they once again visited Baaba Lamin Niasse, and then Ndey Aïda Niasse and Baye's grandson and the Fayḍa's principal imam, Shaykh Hasan Cissé. Ndey Aïda showed her appreciation for their project by walking with them to perform the ritual visit to her father's tomb in Medina Baye, the Fayḍa's spiritual centre in Kaolack. She then took them to the nearby neighbourhood of Léona Niassène to visit the little-known grave of the association's and her own namesake, Mame Astou Diankha. The association's leaders then visited *daayira*s throughout the Dakar area to recruit members. They also continued to visit Shaykh Ibrahim's many children as well as other *muqaddam*s in the area to garner wide support. After attaining a broad base of members, they called a 'general assembly' at a male *muqaddam*'s home and elected a board of directors and an executive leadership.

They then organized a public 'launching day' and applied for official authorization (*récépissé*). Working their connections, they made their public launch on 7 June 2008 a spectacular affair. They invited several famous Taalibe Baay rappers, most of them fellow disciples of Shaykh Mamour Insa – Maxi Krezi, Ling'Star, Biba Arif, Simon, Papis from the group Gelongal, the Bideew Bou Bess brothers – as well as Shaykh Ibrahim's youngest son, Baye Mbaye 'Emcee' Niasse, nicknamed for his own rapper past. The presence of prominent religious chanters (Wolof: *sikkarkat*s) marked the event as a Taalibe Baay gathering.

Born in a hospital at the hands of health professionals, the association's first projects were naturally in health. Rokhaya Thiam describes the association's first venture, free medical consultation days in rural areas and in Qurʾānic schools in Dakar, as something Baaba Lamin Niasse 'initiated', meaning that he suggested villages that might need their services. They also offered services and medicines at the largest annual Taalibe Baay event, the Medina Baye *gàmmu* (Ar.: *mawlid*), the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth that draws hundreds of thousands of disciples from around the world.

At the same time, association members insist that their work targets 'humanity' (*doom u Aadama yi*; literally, 'the children of Adam'). As opposed to religious practices centred on the religious community, the discourse of 'development' today often carries the cosmopolitan implication of transcending parochial

identities to serve all (Hill 2012). Asked why they registered as a 'non-religious non-profit association', Rokhaya Thiam answered that if they had registered as a religious association, 'we would be limited, because maybe people would think that that was all we were about. But we want to help all human beings.' This way, she continued, 'whoever needs us, anywhere from here to the Vatican … people will be able to benefit, for God's sake alone'. Many who are not of 'Baye Niasse's people' are suffering, she said, and those people might not approach them if they perceive the association as strictly for Taalibe Baay. To illustrate their commitment to working for humanity, Rokhaya Thiam mentioned their provision of medical services at the previous year's Màggal, the yearly meeting of members of the rival Murid Sufi order in the city of Touba. They had worked with a non-Fayḍa Tijānī *daayira* and a Murid *daayira* to gather medicines and provide consultations. They have also helped students in Qurʾānic schools not affiliated with the Fayḍa.

Development's developments and a *daayira*'s demise

Between my first encounter with Rokhaya Thiam in 2010 and my subsequent visit in 2014, both her professional activities and AMAD expanded dramatically. Meanwhile, the hospital employees' *daayira* had ceased to exist, and members were attending other group litanies throughout Dakar. Rokhaya Thiam had resigned from the hospital and was now directing her own women's health clinic down the street from the hospital, Clinique Yassine. Hospital employees remained among the association's core members, and Rokhaya Thiam's private clinic, which includes her personal apartment, had become AMAD's new headquarters.

Rokhaya Thiam had already opened a small women's clinic in 2005 in Cambérène, a Dakar neighbourhood on the northern coast of the Cap Vert peninsula, where she would receive patients every day after her work at the hospital. Deciding that Cambérène was far away from her home and day job, she later rented a space next door to a pharmacy called Pharmacie Yassine. Because the pharmacy was already known in the neighbourhood, and because its name is one of the Prophet's names and the name of a chapter of the Qurʾān, Rokhaya Thiam named her clinic Clinique Yassine. At first, she rented only the first above-ground floor for patient consultations. Yet through investing her earnings in equipment, she expanded the clinic to fill the multi-storey building.

Some criticized her for investing her time in a private project while occupying a leadership position at a public hospital, even complaining to the mayor of Dakar. In 2013, she resigned from the hospital to work full-time expanding her clinic. She cited two advantages to running her own clinic: it allows her more time to 'work in the *Fayḍa*' and provides greater income (*wërsëg*). I would add that directing her own clinic seems to fit her independent and entrepreneurial approach to work and religious life. However, facing significant opposition, she initially worried that her project would fail. Some Dakar politicians, falsely interpreting her mobilization of influential people as presaging an entry into politics, 'waged a mighty battle against [her]' (*xeex ma xeex bu méttee métti*). She went to the Fayḍa's leading intellectual, Ustaz Ibrahim Mahmoud 'Barham' Diop (d. 2014), and told him: 'I'm opening a clinic, but there are a lot of fighting and problems, so

I want you to pray for me. He answered: Go, the clinic has succeeded.' Later, Baaba Lamin told her: 'Whatever you lost there [at the hospital], there will be far more here [at the clinic].' In Medina Baye, Shaykh Ibrahim's Khalīfa, Shaykh Tijānī Niasse pronounced prayers and wrote some amulets for her, something she had never seen him do for anyone else. These leaders' guarantee of success convinced her that the clinic was the work of Baye himself.

After leaving the hospital, she began renting from the first to the fourth floor of the building. The first floor houses the consultation and delivery rooms. The second is for hospitalization. She is gradually equipping the third as an operating block with a recovery room and paediatric ward. The clinic's laboratory provides most of the analyses patients need. Her own apartment is on the fourth floor. Her goal is to equip the clinic sufficiently that patients will not need to transfer to the hospital in emergencies. Currently, the staff includes two gynaecologists (one woman and one man), a male paediatrician, a male generalist, three midwives (including herself), four state nurses (three of them men), three maintenance workers, three guards, and a female secretary. Several non-staff specialists provide periodic consultations. In order 'not to have debts', she has gradually invested her clinic's earnings into expanding its capacity, acquiring equipment and hiring new staff. Refusing bank loans, the interest on which makes them hard to pay back, she pays cash for her equipment, either in full or in instalments.

Rokhaya Thiam describes her clinic not just as her livelihood but as part of her larger mission to follow Baye Niasse's example of hard work in the service of people. Explaining her motivation for starting the clinic, she cited Baye Niasse's example as someone who 'worked for the world, so that everyone knew what he accomplished in the world. Baye Niasse had his hands in everything – he was in *politics*, in *legal matters* – he *intervened* in everything.' If we sit in seclusion 'holding our prayer beads and reciting *wird*, saying we're Taalibe Baay, something's lacking'. Ultimately, the goal of working hard is to help people, because 'if you don't help God's servants [people], you're not even a disciple! And in order to help God's servants, you have to work!' Therefore, the clinic charges 'social rates' (a term that echoes NGO discourse) that are similar to public clinic rates and a fraction of typical private clinic rates. Furthermore, they often provide services for free to patients who cannot pay, especially Taalibe Baay women. In addition to allowing her to serve others, the clinic has given her more time and income to devote to 'the Fayḍa', including its various religious events and expanding AMAD.

The association has grown dramatically in size, geographical reach and varieties of activities. Indeed, it is now fulfilling many of the goals that she told me in 2010 she had hoped to fulfil. It now has branches in several other Senegalese cities and is involved in numerous economic activities. In 2010, Rokhaya Thiam had mentioned plans to expand into microcredit. Since then the association has created a state-recognized women's *groupement d'intérêt économique* (GIE) that meets twice a month for this purpose. Its credit model is somewhere between the rotating credit associations that women organize in many parts of the world (known in Senegal by the French term *tontine*) and interest-free microcredit. Initially, AMAD tried providing microcredit through banks, but women found the high interest hard to repay. AMAD's rejection of bank loans may also derive from Islamic prohibitions surrounding interest. Now they do what she describes as 'microcredit that we manage by ourselves'. On the meeting on the tenth of

every month, each member contributes 1,000 CFA francs, and on the twenty-fifth they contribute 2,000 CFA francs. Those who cannot attend in person send their contribution. They end up with enough to finance about ten or fifteen women each time, giving them 30,000 CFA francs the first time and then 45,000 CFA francs after they return the money and continue to participate. These loans have gone towards purchasing work materials, especially for work in food and textile production, areas traditionally dominated by women. Several Taalibe Baay women I interviewed throughout Dakar independently in 2014 mentioned participating in this group as an important personal activity and as an important development in the Taalibe Baay community.

Sanctifying development

When I asked Rokhaya Thiam in 2010 whether they had NGO status, she answered, '*No, no, no*, it's just an *association* – we have not yet become an *NGO*.' She added, chuckling: 'May God bring that to us.' Asked if they wanted to form an NGO, she answered: 'Yes, we want that, because an *NGO* would be more *effective* for us. If we were an *NGO*, we would be able to work much better … but what we are doing is *nearly* what an *NGO* does, even if we are not an *NGO*.' She explained that they were going through the steps, including careful bookkeeping, to apply for recognition as an NGO. Then the government would subsidize their activities and they could realize a lot more projects. A male co-worker and association member added that, if they were an NGO, their massive free medical consultations might draw the UN's attention. New partners might provide an ambulance equipped with diagnostic equipment to serve villages that lacked a clinic and medical laboratory. Rokhaya Thiam concluded that 'it will come', because God was gradually bringing them everything they needed.

Alongside their NGO aspirations, AMAD leaders' talk of helping individuals to 'develop themselves' seems to suggest a neoliberal notion of the entrepreneurial individual as the locus of development. However, much of what they say and do contradicts neoliberal notions of individual responsibility and capital accumulation. They domesticate hegemonic discourses of 'development' within a Sufi context. Here I highlight two aspects of their approach that contradict neoliberal notions of 'development' and subjecthood. One is their rejection of accumulation and individual self-reliance, which are central to neoliberal development projects. The other is their presentation of their mission, success and even their agency as emanating from a posthumously present saint.

Association leaders show a decidedly non-capitalistic approach to managing the association's finances. Refusing to save or accumulate, they immediately spend anything on hand and rely on God to provide. When I asked Rokhaya Thiam whether she managed her private clinic the same way, she laughed and said no; her 'business' requires careful money management to ensure continued operation and regular equipment payments. Her successful business management lacks neither discipline nor foresight. China Scherz (2013) has explored an analogous case of Ugandan nuns who 'make God [their] banker' through eschewing long-term financial planning in their management of a charity home. Like these

nuns, AMAD members cultivate an ethical disposition of faithfulness oriented towards a different temporality.

Many disciples tell of Baye teaching that a strong work ethic is necessary yet that accumulating money shows selfishness and a lack of trust that God will provide. Baye's approach to accumulation was rooted in both religious principles and in a seasonal agrarian economy based on relations of reciprocity and redistribution. Baye reportedly spent enough for basic necessities each day and gave away anything left with no thought for tomorrow's expenses. In one oft-told story, a wealthy foreign disciple gave Baye an envelope containing an offering worth several thousand dollars. Just then, a poor man came asking for alms, and Baye handed him the envelope. The visiting disciple complained that Baye had not even seen how much money was in the envelope, to which Baye replied that he had no need for money. Disciples draw from this the lesson that everything comes from God and that one must in turn give everything to God.

Rokhaya Thiam told me: 'Baye used to say: let's not save, don't save. So we don't save. We each contribute money, and whenever something comes up, we spend on that.' Several stories illustrated this point. For example, less than a month before the Medina Baye *gàmmu*, which draws hundreds of thousands of people, they received a large donation of medicines to use at their field clinic there. The man who was to deliver the medicines was a Murid who was in a hurry to get to the Màggal Touba, the Murids' main annual event several hours' drive away. He called Rokhaya from Touba seeking permission to donate part of the medicines to a field clinic there. She replied: 'The medicines have gone to Touba. They're treating humans [*doom u Aadama*] in Touba. In Medina Baye we'll be treating humans too. And [the *gàmmu* of] Medina Baye is still some ways off, so just treat the people of Touba!' Two days before the Medina Baye *gàmmu*, they still had no medicines. But they suddenly received a donation of several hundred dollars' worth of medicine from Dakar's City Hall (*Mairie*). Rokhaya Thiam had approached the director of City Hall to request a city ambulance for the event. Without her mentioning the need for medicines, he announced that the city would lend them an ambulance plus 300,000 CFA francs' (about US$600) worth of medicines, much more than the amount they had given up for Touba. If they had withheld medicine from Touba, Rokhaya Thiam told me, some people would have gone untreated, and God may have withheld this larger support. She told me:

> Even if we just have one small box of medicine, and that small box of medicine can help only five people … we don't say let's save it up until we have a lot. We say, let's give it to those five people so they can get well, then we'll find a way to get more.

The same principle applies to money sitting idle in an account. Youma Konaté, the association's treasurer, explained that each member contributes an annual 5,000 CFA francs (US$10) membership fee. Rather than budgeting it to use throughout the year, they immediately spend anything that comes in. For much of the year, then, the treasury is empty and core members themselves must finance activities. But this is not a problem, because 'we give everything we have to Baye, and everything we need we ask back from him'. Association members told me they hoped to acquire an ambulance equipped with analytical and surgical equipment so

villagers would no longer have to travel to expensive city hospitals. Yet they never suggested saving up to buy such equipment instead of helping people today.

AMAD members' choice of 'development' projects cannot be reduced to a material cost–benefit analysis but is shaped by specific spiritual genealogies, geographies, and notions of the individual. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that the basis of their organization is their love for Baye Niasse, their 'sole partner', to whom they give everything and whom they ask for everything they need. One way of showing devotion to Baye is through offering their free consultations in historically Taalibe Baay communities. Moreover, they often choose locations with particular spiritual significance, for example Medina Baye, the Fayḍa's spiritual capital; Kossi Mbitéyène, where the Fayḍa began; villages where Taalibe Baay leaders have personal connections; and the Qurʾānic schools of Baye's daughter Shaykha Maryam Niasse in Dakar. They provide their services at a number of major Taalibe Baay religious meetings. Providing medical services to Qurʾānic schools not only helps children living in abject conditions but is also an act of piety connecting them to the spiritual blessings of the Qurʾān.

Thus, beyond conceiving of 'development' as a religious duty, association members often choose 'development projects' that double as devotional activities. Such activities help other people while paying homage to Baye and accessing the blessing (*barke*) of leaders and Qurʾānic students. Association founders continually frame their activities as a means of making Baye's mother's name known to the world. Rokhaya Thiam even described plans to organize the association's teachers to research the little-known life of Mame Astou Diankha and publish a book about her. These goals are presented as missions Baye has assigned them.

Even after the demise of the *daayira*, this 'non-religious' association performs many religious functions typically performed by *daayira*s, such as collecting members' contributions to support larger Taalibe Baay *gàmmu*s. Every year, collaborating with Ndey Aïda Niasse and her *daayira* in Kaolack, they organize a 'Mame Astou Diankha Day' in Léona Niassène Kaolack near the tombs of Mame Astou Diankha and Baye's father Al-Ḥājj ʿAbd Allāh Niasse. Like the association itself, they describe this event as designed to spread the name of Mame Astou Diankha. The event features Qurʾānic recitations by Qurʾān students in the morning and an afternoon 'conference' at which several male leaders speak about the role of women in Islam. AMAD also provides its signature free medical consultations and prescriptions. In short, the transformation of the *daayira* into a 'non-religious association' entailed not a shift away from religion but a more concrete and ambitious realization of it.

Conclusion

This account of Rokhaya Thiam and her collaborators in AMAD exemplifies a hybrid religious subjectivity that I call 'charismatic discipleship'. In many ways, AMAD reflects the rising hegemony of neoliberal institutions and discourses, which throughout the global South are most palpably embodied in the institution of the NGO and in discourses and practices of 'development', especially oriented towards women. The widespread phenomenon of approaching discipleship as an entrepreneurial matter of discovering a unique project to fulfil seems to reflect the

liberal ideal of the enterprising individual and may result from neoliberal economic dislocation.

Even if global conditions increasingly require each person to blaze an original and often entrepreneurial path to self-realization, the nature of the person and path in question must not be taken for granted. Taalibe Baay habitually describe their work and their own personal self-realization in terms of the 'annihilation' (*fanā'*) of individuality in union with God through Baye's intervention. Even as Rokhaya Thiam and her fellow association leaders carve out new roles for themselves, they apprehend themselves not as innovators but as executors of a divine mission revealed and guaranteed by Baye.

Religious conceptions not only frame the mission as a whole but guide its day-to-day operation. Association leaders emphatically refuse the principles of capital investment and accumulation known in development discourse as 'self-reliance'. They instead insist on giving oneself and everything one has to God and in turn relying completely on God. Their version of 'microcredit' eschews interest while adapting some aspects of prevalent rotating credit. Although Rokhaya Thiam sees her own clinic as similarly part of her mission and similarly avoids loans with interest, her successful investments in it following capitalistic principles demonstrate a mastery of more than one repertoire of economic action.

In short, Rokhaya Thiam and her collaborators are both subjects of neoliberal hegemony and disciples who put neoliberal discursive and institutional resources into the service of a decidedly non-liberal religious mission. Still, is such hybridity not intrinsic to what it means to be a neoliberal subject today? Are not all neoliberal subjects subject to neoliberal powers that shape their world while also domesticating that power in relation to forms of power and knowledge that exceed reduction to it?

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Abstract

Midwife Rokhaya Thiam joined the Fayḍa Tijāniyya Sufi Islamic movement in 2005 and soon became aware of her divine mission to found the Association Mame Astou Diankha. This organization provides free medical services to needy people and organizes economic development projects for women. Rokhaya Thiam exemplifies a broader trend of 'hybrid' religious subjects in the Fayḍa Tijāniyya movement who embed neoliberal notions such as 'development' and individual entrepreneurial initiative into mystical notions of selfhood, agency and moral order. Such charismatic disciples seem to approach discipleship in liberal fashion, pursuing an individualized mission in contrast to the classic Sufi disciple who passively follows instructions from the shaykh. However, these disciples defy reduction to individual, neoliberal subjectivity, subsuming their agency under a larger spiritual entity responsible for revealing and realizing their mission. This article asks whether such hybridities may be intrinsic to neoliberal subjecthood, which entails being shaped by neoliberal power and knowledge while

domesticating them to other ends, rather than being exceptions that emerge on the still-enchanted edges of neoliberalism.

Résumé

Peu après qu'elle ait rejoint en 2005 le mouvement islamique soufi Fayḍa Tijāniyya, Rokhaya Thiam, une sage-femme, a pris rapidement conscience de sa mission divine de fonder l'Association Mame Astou Diankha. Cette organisation fournit des services médicaux gratuits aux nécessiteux et organise des projets de développement économique pour les femmes. Rokhaya Thiam exemplifie une tendance plus générale de sujets religieux « hybrides » au sein du mouvement Fayḍa Tijāniyya qui intègrent des notions néolibérales comme le « développement » et l'entrepreneuriat individuel dans des notions mystiques d'individualité, d'action et d'ordre moral. Ces disciples charismatiques semblent aborder leur statut de disciple de façon libérale, en poursuivant une mission individualisée en rupture avec le disciple soufi classique qui suit passivement les instructions du cheikh. En revanche, on ne peut pas réduire ces disciples à une subjectivité néolibérale individuelle car ils inscrivent leur action sous une entité spirituelle plus vaste qui a la charge de révéler et de réaliser leur mission. Cet article pose la question de savoir si ces hybridités peuvent être intrinsèques au statut de sujet néolibéral qui implique d'être façonné par un pouvoir et un savoir néolibéraux tout en les apprivoisant à d'autres fins, plutôt que de constituer des exceptions émergeant à la marge enchantée du néolibéralisme.