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► **To cite this version:**

Johara Berriane. Religious Place-Making and African Mobilities.: Muslim and Christian Moroccan Sites in Migrant Trajectories within and beyond the Continent. Meron Zeleke; Lahra Smith. African Perspectives on South-South Migration, Routledge, pp.149 - 168, 2024, 9781003368267. 10.4324/9781003368267-12 . halshs-04628734

**HAL Id: halshs-04628734**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04628734>**

Submitted on 28 Jun 2024

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## 9 Religious Place-Making and African Mobilities

### Muslim and Christian Moroccan Sites in Migrant Trajectories within and beyond the Continent

*Johara Berriane*

#### Introduction

The privileged relations between Morocco and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa are not only political and economic. They are, in essence, age-old human and spiritual ties. Given the situation in some of these countries, many of their citizens immigrate to Morocco legally or illegally. Formerly a transit point to Europe, our country has become a residence destination. Faced with the significant increase in the number of immigrants from Africa and Europe, we have invited the government to develop a new comprehensive policy on immigration and asylum issues, following a humanitarian approach in line with our country's international commitments and respecting the rights of immigrants. To illustrate the special interest We attach to this aspect, We have charged a ministerial department with immigration issues.

(Speech of King Mohammed VI, 6 November 2013)<sup>1</sup>

The speech of the Moroccan King Mohammed VI cited above as well as the concrete migration policy measures towards sub-Saharan migrants that followed have been analyzed as significant indicators of the country's geopolitical reorientation towards Africa (Cherti and Collyer 2015). At the same time, during this speech, the Moroccan monarch referred for the first time to Morocco's role as an immigration country. It represents a remarkable change in public awareness of Morocco's role as a receiving country. While there were a significant number of European immigrants in Morocco during colonial times, this number gradually decreased in the 1960s. At the same time, with more than 5 million Moroccans living abroad today, Morocco has become one of the most important African emigration countries. But since the early 1990s, Morocco also became a place of residence for a growing number of migrants from West, Central Africa, and Europe as well as Syrian refugees. Whereas European immigration to Morocco has rather been neglected by academic scholars,<sup>2</sup> 'sub-Saharan' migration in Morocco has, since early 2000, become a popular research topic (see for example Barros et al. 2002; Escoffier 2008; Alioua 2009; AMERM 2009; Péraldi 2011; Norman 2016; Mourji et al. 2016; Mouna et al. 2017; Üstübcici et al. 2018; Berriane 2018; Stock 2019; Haouari et al. 2020; Gazzotti 2021).

The growth of migrants from West and Central Africa in Morocco has been mainly understood as an effect of the tightening of European border controls (AMERM 2009; Bensaâd 2009; Péraldi 2011). Indeed, the tightening of European migration policies towards African nationals in cooperation with Morocco, which has been taking place gradually since 1997 has contributed to transforming the kingdom into a European frontier zone where migrants have become blocked and had only a few opportunities to move forward (see for example Perrin 2009; Casas-Cortes et al. 2013; Vacchiano 2013). However, this perception of migration flows between West and North Africa and the settlement of migrants in Moroccan cities as a mere effect of Europe's closure is not only a very 'Eurocentric' perspective. This point of view also undermines the value of research approaches that highlight the diachronic dimension of migration projects (King et al. 2006; McKeown 2019) and that demonstrate the intertwining of migration and other forms of spatial mobility (Bruijn et al. 2001; Schapendonk 2020). This perception ignores the long-standing relations and mobilities between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa as well as the different historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors that have played an equally important role for today's migration processes as the kingdom's geographical proximity to Europe and its role as a stepping stone or a waiting post to Europe.

In this chapter, I would like to highlight the complexity of mobility patterns and installations of Central and West African migrants in Morocco<sup>3</sup> while focusing on religious place-making, as the "activity of establishing a particular locality for religious practice" (Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010, p. 8). This approach allows me to empirically examine the meaningfulness and significance of Moroccan places for migrants and to consider the role played by religious sites as nodes for transnational circulation and settlement. In particular, I would like to show how religious places and the social spaces<sup>4</sup> associated with them support migrants in their local settlement. At the same time, these places and the spaces are drivers for new forms of migration and circulation. In part, these places are created by migrants, while in part they are places that have already existed and are transformed. Looking at the interrelations of migration and religious place-making also makes it possible to show how the (Moroccan) places that migrants cross or where they settle can be or become part of their imaginaries. They are not only localities where migrants are in an extraordinary transitory state of in-between (Pian 2009), a state from which they only emerge again when they settle permanently or return home. In doing so, this contribution will not only recentre the perspective on the South-South dynamics of African migration to Morocco, but also show how the longstanding relations between Moroccan cities and sub-Saharan Africa shape today's migration patterns and the multiplicity of forms of migration and mobility encountered in Morocco. That would also suggest that instead of analyzing Morocco as a country that was previously a space of transit and has become a space of immigration, we should rather look at the connections and the overlapping of long-term forms of settlement and modes of circulation.

The chapter is based on two research projects in which the connections between transnational mobility, migration, and religious place-making have been investigated empirically. The first enquiry took place between 2008 and 2014 and focused

on a Muslim Sufi pilgrimage site in the Moroccan city of Fès.<sup>5</sup> The second investigation was conducted from 2014 to 2017 in the cities of Rabat and Casablanca and studied the place-making of Pentecostal African migrant churches.<sup>6</sup> Both projects were based on ethnographic research methods, such as participant observation and qualitative interviews. These projects investigated from different perspectives and in different urban settings the various connections between intra-continental transnational spatial mobility and religious place-making in Morocco. Whereas the first project focuses on a historical Muslim place located in a Moroccan old town and used by West African migrants and locals, the second investigation looks at religious spaces produced more recently in Moroccan suburbs by Christian migrants from Central and West Africa. Comparing the results of these two studies will enable us to see how places linked to different religious traditions with different historical backgrounds and different positioning in local power relations (a majority and a minority religion) can play similar roles for migration projects. The comparative analysis of the connections between migration and religious flows in Moroccan settings highlights further the multiple and complex intra-continental religious entanglements and circulations in Africa. After a brief theoretical overview on the interlinkages between migration, mobility, and religion, I will describe how the shrine of the founder of the Tidjaniyya Sufi order based in Fès has contributed to the development of translocal religious networks and mobility between West Africa (particularly Senegal) and Morocco. In a third section, I will focus on the more recently founded Pentecostal migrant churches in Rabat and their role in the life trajectories and migration projects of Central and West African migrants.

### **Religion, Migration and Community Formation: Giving Meaning to the Temporal Stay**

In recent decades, scholarly works have clearly demonstrated the crucial role of religious practices and institutions in migrants' daily and community lives. Mainly conducted in traditional immigration countries, this research has shown the role of religious practices in the everyday and community life of migrants (e.g., Levitt 2007; Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010; Vásquez and Knott 2014). It has also shown the importance of migrants' establishment of religious places, especially in the formation of a sense of home (Vásquez and Friedmann Marquardt 2003; Baker 2013; Sheringham and Wilkins 2018). Migrants also engage in the creation of religious spaces in urban settings as a means for them to enhance their visibility (Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010), and to participate locally beyond their communal and cultural group (Baker 2013). Studies have further shown how transnational social networks and religious institutions and practices are intertwined (Levitt 2007; Garbin 2014).

The role of religion as a migratory resource and tool to give sense and a home to people on the move is particularly relevant for Africa, where 'mobility' in itself is extremely important, i.e. that migration consists of very different forms of mobility and travel. These forms of migration can also be circulatory or represent permanent forms of living that do not only have economic motives (see for example De

Bruijn et al. 2001). However, the interlinkages between migration and religion in African settings have only recently started to receive attention from scholars. Most of these recent works have been conducted in South Africa and have focused on the role of Christian churches or Muslim mosques as spaces of local and transnational belonging in big cities (see for example Landau 2009; Bukasa 2018; Cazarin 2018; Sigamoney 2018). Similar accounts have been made by Bruce Whitehouse on West African Muslim spaces in the Congolese city of Brazzaville (Whitehouse 2012). Due to their transnational dimension, in the sense of “complex, pendular and multidirectional movements” (Adogame and Spickard 2010, 56), African migration flows within and beyond the continent have contributed significantly to the dissemination of religious movements, ideas, and practices. This has also led to a range of studies on the transnationalization of African religions (see for example Fourchard et al. 2005; Adogame 2013; Settler and Engh 2018; Van Dijk 2002 and 2004) that could demonstrate the significant impact of African actors, ideas, practices, and movements for global religions both within and beyond the African continent. Within the research field of trans-Saharan migration, the role of religion for migrants on the move has also been observed. During the crossing of the Sahara Desert and for the temporal settlement, religion has become a crucial spiritual and material resource (Bava 2005; Escoffier 2008; Bredeloup 2013; Bava and Boissevain 2014). Researchers have also analyzed the social and cultural effects of trans-Saharan migration on the Sahelian and Saharan cities where Central and West African migrants settle temporarily (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005).

In Morocco, research has primarily focused on the socio-economic integration of sub-Saharan migrants (Kettani and Péraldi 2011; Pickerill 2011; Weyel 2015; Mourji et al. 2016). Other scholars have analyzed how African migrants being supported by Moroccan civil society and later globalization movements were able to mobilize in order to claim more rights (Alioua 2009; Pian 2009). The religious effects of the presence of African migrants in Moroccan cities have also received some attention more recently. These works have shown how the more or less permanent settlements of West and Central African migrants have contributed to a pluralization of the religious landscape and the introduction of new forms of religiosity (Coyault 2014; 2021; Bava 2016; Bava and Boissevain 2020; Berriane 2020). At the same time, the Christian and Muslim spaces used and shaped by sub-Saharan African migrants are usually neither publicly visible nor shared with locals (Timéra 2011; Berriane 2014; 2021; Coyault 2021).

This contribution draws on these later works. It aims to show how in different Moroccan urban settings religious places (Muslim and Christian) and the ritual and social spaces linked to them play a crucial role in the mobility and the settlements of migrants in Africa and beyond. While looking at the interrelations of migration and religion as well as the role of transnational religion for home-making and social networking, it will show how the (Moroccan) places that migrants cross or where they settle are not places where migrants are in an extraordinary transitory state of in-between but rather places and sites that have a meaning for them and can be or become part of their imaginaries.

### **The *Zawiya* of Ahmad al-Tidjani in Fès Past and Present: A Drive for Migration and Mobility between North and West Africa**

Given its historical role as a translocal intellectual centre, the city of Fès represents a prime place to analyze the long-standing history of West African migration towards Morocco. With its theological university, al-Qarawiyyin, founded in the 9th century, Fès has long been an important intellectual centre for African scholars. Similarly, the existence of the tomb of the founder of the Tidjaniyya Sufi order<sup>7</sup> has been playing a crucial role in the consolidation of translocal religious networks between Fès and West African places. As I will show now, these religious networks have contributed, until today, to foster different forms of migration and mobility and have shaped the migration projects of West African migrants based or circulating in Morocco.

#### ***Trans-Saharan Tidjani Networks and Multidirectional Circulations between West Africa and Fès during Colonial Times***

After the establishment of the Tidjaniyya Sufi order in an Algerian oasis in 1781/82, the Sufi scholar Ahmad al-Tidjani settled in Fès, where he built a Sufi lodge (a *zawiya*). From there, the Tidjaniyya teachings spread throughout the region and reached West Africa in 1820. Partly by an armed movement established in 1852 by al-Hajj Umar Tall, different channels of transmission departed from Mauritania towards Guinea, Senegal, and today's Mali. The Sufi order spread further to other places in Africa, Asia, and beyond. Although the Tidjaniyya order is currently found in several countries within the Muslim world, it certainly has more prominence in African countries (Triaud 2000: 10), especially in Senegal where it represents the first brotherhood by the number of its followers. Like many Sufi orders or spiritual paths (*tariqa*), the Tidjaniyya has developed many branches over time and represents today more a shared heritage of readings and rites and a strong identity than an organized, centralized Sufi order (Triaud 2000: 14). Today, there are various religious centres and Tidjani branches and families with international outreach. Besides the multipolarity of the Tidjaniyya, Fès has developed into one of its most significant sites (El Adnani 2005: 181). With the burial of Ahmad al-Tidjani in his *zawiya* in 1815, the edifice acquired even greater value in the eyes of the Tidjani adepts for whom it became a significant pilgrimage site and a place to foster translocal social networks.

Already at the beginning of the 20th century, networks with Fès had gained importance for Senegalese Tidjani scholars, as they usually made a stop in Morocco on their way to Mecca to visit the tomb of Ahmad al-Tidjani and to meet Moroccan Tidjani scholars. At this time, the role of the journeys to Fès became particularly important for the religious careers of Tidjani scholars. This was the case, for instance, of one of the most influential Tidjani scholars of the 20th century, Ibrahim Niassé (1900–1975). In his account of his first journey to the Hijaz (to Mecca) in 1937, he documented how he had travelled to Fès via Morocco on the way there and back to visit the tomb of Ahmad al-Tidjani and to meet Moroccan scholars who

had been initiated directly into the Tidjaniyya teaching by companions of Ahmad al-Tidjani. The meetings with scholars in Fès had an effect on his religious authority and recognition as spiritual guide (*muqaddam*), i.e. who is allowed to initiate into the Tidjaniyya teachings (for more details see Berriane 2016).

Since the late 19th–early 20th century, the Tidjani networks between Senegal and Fès also contributed to the fact that members of large trading families from Fès made their way to Senegal and settled in Saint Louis, which became the first capital of French West Africa (Abou el Farah et al. 1997). This Moroccan migration to Saint Louis was mainly characterized by the fact that the traders mostly belonged to the Moroccan elite from Fès and married Senegalese women, most of whom also came from influential local families. This created a *métisse* community with very high social status and close ties to Fès, where, for example, the children were sent to grow with relatives in order to learn and pass on the Arabic language and Moroccan customs (Abou el Farah et al. 1997; Berriane 2019). While the Tidjaniyya does not play a significant role today for the descendants of these Moroccan migrants, these religious networks played an essential role for their settlement, trade activities, and local integration in Saint Louis (*Ibid.*).

From the 1920s to the 1950s, journeys to the shrine of Ahmad al-Tidjani to Fès were also organized by French colonial administration as part of the pilgrimage to Mecca, for loyal West African Muslims (Marfaing 2004; El Adnani 2005; Sambe 2010; Berriane 2016). Between 1928 and 1958, the annual pilgrimage of West Africans to Mecca was made under the supervision of a commissioner of the government of French West Africa, in order to control all contacts between the Muslims of French West Africa and the Muslims of North Africa, the latter being suspected of supporting nationalist and independence movements (El Adnani 2005). From that moment on, it became common for boats heading towards Mecca to stop off in Casablanca or Oran for a stay of a few weeks before continuing the journey on another ship with Maghrebian pilgrims. This stay was very often used to buy some goods that were later given or sold in the home country (Marfaing 2004: 246–247). It became also the rule to travel to Fès to visit the tomb of Ahmad al-Tidjani: after the involvement of private travel agencies in the organization of pilgrimages to Mecca in the 1950s, pilgrimages to Mecca via Morocco were still offered.<sup>8</sup> Senegalese pilgrims, in particular after independence (1960) opted for journeys that combined the pilgrimage to Mecca with a stop in Morocco and a visit of the shrine of Fès.<sup>9</sup> With the closure of the sea link between Dakar and Casablanca in 1970 and the introduction of direct flights to Jeddah for the pilgrimage to Mecca, the number of West African travellers stopping by in Fès during their journey to Mecca decreased. However, they have been replaced by other West African travellers whose mobility and stay in Morocco was also linked to the *zawiya* and its networks.

#### *Ahmad al-Tidjani's Zawiya in Today's Transnational Mobility to Morocco*

In the aftermath of African independence, the movement of West African people heading to Morocco was also influenced by the religious journey to Fès. Besides the development and commodification of the Tidjani pilgrimage practices to Fès,



the development of transnational informal trade, student mobility, and migration were also linked to the existence of trans-Saharan Tidjani networks and mobility towards Fès. Whereas these networks were first connecting Fès to West African places, the more recent circulations and networks were also originating in Europe.

In her work on Senegalese traders, Laurence Marfaing demonstrated how the Tidjani pilgrimage to Fès was closely tied to the development of informal commerce between Senegal and Morocco (Marfaing 2004: 235–260). In the 1960s, Senegalese women in particular began to travel to Morocco to buy goods, which they later sold in Senegal. According to Marfaing, the sacred dimension of the journey to Morocco – the place where the founder of the Tidjaniyya was buried – played a significant role in the existence of this activity, as it allowed female traders to make these journeys alone and engage in trade activities. Senegalese female traders also used the Tidjaniyya networks to find accommodation in various cities in Morocco where Tidjani lodges were located (*Ibid*). The mobility of pilgrim-merchants and their goods that initially occurred between Morocco and West Africa (especially Senegal) is nowadays also extending towards Europe. Some Senegalese pilgrims who reside in Europe use their journey to Morocco to supply themselves with Moroccan products that they later sell to migrants based in Europe (Kane 2007). Making the pilgrimage to Fès is also an opportunity for transnational couples (usually the husbands live in France or Spain and the wives are engaged in trade activities between Morocco and Senegal) to meet and exchange goods (coming from Europe and Senegal) (Berriane 2015a). Through these activities, the city of Fès has become a hub for people and goods circulating between Senegal and Europe and is consequently today a site in West African transnational territories (Kane 2007; Berriane 2015a).

The significance of the Tidjani networks for the migration and local insertion of various mobile groups is also apparent in the surroundings of the *zawiya*, where different groups meet and connect with each other. Indeed, traders circulating between Morocco and Senegal played and play an important role as intermediaries for pilgrims, migrants and students who wish to immigrate to Morocco. In this context, for example, the neighbourhood around Ahmad al-Tijani's tomb itself has become a temporary base for circulating Senegalese street traders who use the shrine as a social space to establish local contacts, as well as to gain access to accommodation and local business partners.

Similarly, West African students receive pilgrims and pilgrim-traders from their countries of origin and accompany them on their journey to Fès. The mobilities of West African students towards Fès are the oldest mobilities. It was common for West African pilgrims to combine the pious journey to Mecca with study periods in North African theological universities, including the al-Qarawiyyine University founded in the 9th century in Fès (Harrak 1994). Even today, this university attracts West African students who come to further their studies in Islamic sciences. It is also common for the al-Qarawiyyine to be one of the stages in the university curriculum of a sub-Saharan student, who then goes on to other Arab theological universities in Tunis, Cairo, or the Gulf States (Bava et al. 2013). In addition to the mobility of religious students, a considerable number of sub-Saharan students – mainly from



French-speaking countries – are heading for Moroccan public and private universities to study economics, law, natural sciences, and technical sciences. Thus, during the 2008–2009 academic year, 1,039 sub-Saharan students were enrolled in public institutions in Fès. In the same year, the private education sector in Fès had 852 foreign students (i.e. 36.6% of students in general), the majority of whom were from French-speaking African countries (Berriane 2015b). Among the private schools in Fès, some even have specialized in foreign students from West African countries such as Mali, Senegal, or Guinea (Touré 2014). In 2021, more than 19,000 African students were studying at Moroccan public universities.<sup>10</sup>

In this way, the tomb of Ahmad al-Tidjani has become a hub for different forms of mobilities and a site in the transnational territories of West African individuals who trade, work or study in Morocco. Through its integration in these West African territories, the Moroccan Tidjani site also becomes a religious meaning for West African migrants who settle in Fès.

### *The Zawiya in the Quotidian Life of African Migrants Based in Fès*

Besides hosting traders and students, Fès has also become a destination for migrants since the early 2000. Many migrants choose Fès as a stopover or a place of retreat after an unsuccessful attempt to reach Europe or after spending some time in other Moroccan cities. These migrants are mainly from West Africa (84.6%) with a small minority of Central Africans. Being mostly men (77.4%), they represent a predominantly young community and 91% of them are between 20 and 35 years old (Berriane 2018).<sup>11</sup> They often live on circumstantial solidarity and small jobs. Those with higher education qualifications work, like many French-speaking students based in Morocco, in international call centres that have relocated to the city in recent years. As with the students, the stay in Fès is rarely planned as a lasting settlement. Most of them came at the earliest five years ago and more than a third have been living in the city for less than a year (*Ibid.*). Although the religious history of Fès and its connections with the South does not play a direct role in the city's choice as a destination, the religious meaning of the city becomes relevant once in Morocco. The very existence of the *zawiya* of Ahmad al-Tidjani in Fès can be relevant for the migratory project or the quotidian life of West African migrants based in Morocco.

I was in Casablanca when I started to think about how to reach Europe. But what also motivated me to come to Fès was that I am a Moslem, and I am a Sufi. I knew that in the *zawiya* of Ahmad al-Tidjani, there are numerous Senegalese. Therefore, I thought that if I went to Fès, it would be easier for me. And since all Senegalese Tidjanis dream of visiting the *zawiya* in Fès, I thought that given that I was still in Morocco, not knowing until when I would stay, I had to take advantage of this opportunity and go to Fès. Spiritually it gives me more strength.

(Interview, Senegalese, male, Fès, May 2010)

This is the statement of a 20-year-old Senegalese migrant interviewed in Fès and who had not initially planned to settle neither in Fès nor in Morocco. He travelled

to Morocco by bus and spent six months in Marrakech then went to Casablanca where he found a permanent job in a call centre. However, besides this job opportunity, he decided to proceed with his journey, moving to Fès. This new destination was motivated by the religious meaning this place has for the society of origin. He wanted to give a religious purpose to his stay.

In a similar way, a female Tidjani disciple from Dakar settled in Fès after getting married to a Senegalese migrant working in Italy. Fès was chosen due to its geographical proximity to Italy and the existence of cheap low-cost flights between Fès and North Italy so that her husband could visit her frequently. After having discovered the city during a pilgrimage to the *zawiya*, she found accommodation with local families living in the surroundings of the shrine and decided to extend her stay. During her stay which lasted more than six months she spent all day praying in the *zawiya*, conceiving her stay in Morocco as a spiritual retreat (Interview, Senegalese, female, Fès, 15 May 2010). And later, after she was able to join her husband in Brescia, she maintained her relationships with Fès and has been visiting the *zawiya* and the local families regularly (field notes, Fès, June 2012). Besides giving sense to the stay in Morocco, this second example shows how the religious meaning of the stay in Fès contributes to building a relationship with Morocco that can last even when the migrant has left the country. It reassesses the value of the moment spent in Morocco that represents more than just a moment of waiting and can be a driver of future North-South mobilities connecting Morocco to West African migrant communities in Europe.

Besides reorienting or giving a new meaning to the journeys of Senegalese migrants, the existence of the *zawiya* can also become relevant for West African migrants arriving or stranding in the city. The interviews conducted with migrants who have been living in Fès have shown that they mostly know this place and visited the saint. The shrine represents a place where they are able to connect both in a symbolic and in a concrete way with their 'home'. A Malian student tried to convince me that Ahmad al-Tidjani is a particular saint, saying:

There is a saint who is sleeping there. For that reason, you cannot compare it with a mosque. And this saint, it is our saint. He is a saint in Islam. He can be your mediator with God. If you go there, you can make some wishes there and they can be fulfilled. Even if you are not Muslim, you can go there and inshallah your wishes might be fulfilled. My mother, who is very pious, told me if you go to Fès. You should go there and pray.

(Interview, Malian, male, Fès, May 2010)

Further, the *zawiya* is a religious place in which West African migrants connect socially with their home country. These migrants often have no local social networks, and the tomb has become a preferred religious site where they feel much more welcome and belonging, unlike other religious sites in the city. Those migrants who come from countries with Sufi traditions (Senegal, Mali, or Nigeria for instance) perceive the visit of the *zawiya* as a way to connect with their homeland (Interview, Malian, male, May 2010). They can meet their fellow countrymen and women and the place reminds them of rituals and practices they are familiar with. It was for

instance the case of a homeless migrant from Burkina Faso who regularly went to the tomb to “see people from home” (Interview, Burkinabe, male, May 2010). The identification with the place and its appropriation by West African migrants of the city becomes also apparent in the account of an Ivorian migrant who, although being Christian, visited regularly the *zawiya* to benefit from the blessings of the saint’s descendants (Interview, Ivorian, male, 22 June 2010). Due to its translocal outreach and the presence of West African fellows, the *zawiya* is a place where West African migrants feel to belong. In this way, Morocco has been integrated into the sacred and social territories of many West African mobile people crossing or settling temporarily in this North African society with whom they share similar Sufi traditions.

### **Migration, Mobility, and Christian Place-Making in the Suburbs of Rabat**

The section above described how a Muslim site and the Sufi community related to it have been shaping transnational social spaces and multidirectional mobilities between West Africa, Morocco, and Europe during the last century. This *zawiya* is characterized by its anchorage both in Moroccan and West African society. Due to this shared heritage, Fès has been meaningful for West African migrants and other mobile people who have been travelling or settling in Morocco in past and present. The discussion in this section will shift the focus on another religious tradition and on another Moroccan urban setting. It deals with ritual spaces created and used by Christian African migrants in the suburbs of the Moroccan capital of Rabat. Although these places are the direct effect of more recent migration flows and introduce a foreign religion, their existence and use reflect also the complexity of Morocco’s migration pattern and the country’s place in transnational African spaces.

### ***Revitalization and Pluralization of the Christian Landscape of Morocco’s Main Cities***

Due to the more recent immigration movements from sub-Saharan Africa to Morocco, a revitalization and diversification of the religious and especially Christian landscape has been taking place in Morocco’s main cities such as Rabat. Christianity in Morocco was originally linked to the colonial past, as there were and are no official Christian locals (Bava 2016; Bava and Boissevain 2020). During colonial times, Protestant and Catholic churches were built and used exclusively by European settlers. As a result, following independence in 1956, all the churches served only a limited number of European worshippers, with Christianity being perceived as the religion of the French and Spanish colonizers (Baida and Féroldi 1995). Since the 1980s, with the arrival first of Christian students and later migrants from West and Central Africa, these same places were reactivated and filled up again.

In addition to the revival of historic churches, a pluralization and spatial expansion of the Christian landscape has been taking place since 2004 on the outskirts of the main Moroccan cities. This was especially the case in the capital Rabat which was for

a long time the most popular destination for African students, migrants, and asylum seekers (Alioua 2009). A survey conducted by the Protestant church in 2013 find out a large variety of newly founded Christian churches in the city.<sup>12</sup> These places, which often are referred to as house-churches, have all been founded by migrants from Central (both Congo states) and West Africa (mainly Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Liberia) and are exclusively frequented by migrants from these regions (Coyault 2014; Berriane 2020). Besides slight doctrinal differences, these churches belong mostly to the charismatic movement which has become the most influential Christian movement in Africa (and worldwide) and attaches, among other things, a central importance to the work of the Holy Spirit in teaching and faith practice (Robbins 2004).

Through the very existence of these new Christian places of worship, Christianity in Morocco has become more diversified. It is also no longer confined to isolated places inherited from the colonial past. When we consider the geographical placement of these Christian places, the majority are situated in working-class and impoverished districts where African migrants have settled more or less permanently during the last 25 years. All the churches visited were in the most run-down buildings in the street, some above illegal liquor vendors (interview 10, male, DRC, 18 December 2015), while others had had to relocate up to five times before their leaders were able to find a safe and permanent site for their gatherings (interview 12, male, DRC, 1 January 2016). These are also the districts where former migrants have run hostels (typically referred to as ‘foyers’) where migrants settled first and have remained until they are able to continue their journey (Timéra 2009). Since 2014, many migrants also started to move to new suburbs south of Rabat such as Témara or Mohammedia or north to Salé where the rents were lower and where they were able to move their churches or establish additional places of worship (Berriane 2021). As discussed elsewhere, one of the primary reasons for the existence of these spaces of worship is to provide a base for stranded migrants who are blocked in Morocco and who cannot rely on strong social ties (Coyault 2014; Berriane 2020; Bava 2021). For them the church becomes an important space of belonging and participation when they arrive to Morocco. Besides their social role, these places of worship are not officially recognized by the Moroccan state and stay invisible (Berriane 2021; Coyault 2021). They also do not target locals since Christian proselytization is not allowed by Moroccan law.<sup>13</sup> Their proselytization mission is therefore mainly directed to other West and Central African migrants and local authorities tend to rather ignore the existence of these Christian ritual spaces as long as they do not become public (Berriane 2021). The religious worship tends to focus on migrants’ emigration aspirations and the struggles experienced in Morocco (Bava 2016; Berriane 2021). However, these semi-private charismatic churches are not a mere side effect of the permanent settlement of African Christian foreigners in Morocco but rather the result of diverse forms of circulation and mobility.

***Morocco’s Role in the Migration Projects of Church Leaders and Members:  
A Stepping Stone and a Permanent Destination***

An analysis of the life trajectories of church leaders reveals a direct link between their migration projects and their church activities. It reflects the complexity of

Morocco's migration patterns and highlights the churches' position as a node that enables both installation and circulation. Indeed, it turned out that only half of the church leaders I interviewed between 2015 and 2017 were planning to move on to Europe or North America. The others had changed their migration project or came to Morocco specifically to stay permanently. This was for example the case of a pastor from Kinshasa who came to Morocco at the beginning of 2003 to emigrate to Europe, but now wants to remain in Morocco. He lives in Rabat with his wife and four daughters and even his oldest daughter – who had lived in Kinshasa for the previous 12 years – was able to join the family in 2016. It was only in Morocco that he became a member of a house church and was later appointed by this pastor (who was able to migrate to France) as his successor. In this way, he also became a renowned person in the Congolese migrant community, which also helps him in his other activities. For example, he owns a small shop selling African goods, organizes “informal” money transfers between Morocco and his home country and is involved in a cultural association he co-founded (Interview 17, RDC, male, Rabat, 20 October 2017).

Other church leaders who immigrated to Morocco later saw Morocco as their main destination from the beginning. It is the case, for example, of a woman from Abidjan, who was sent by her Ivorian church to Casablanca to establish a branch there, just after the Moroccan King has announced the launching of a migration policy and an operation to regularize migrants. When I met her in 2015 and asked her about her plans, she explained that she was applying for a residency permit and wanted to stay in Morocco (Interview 3, Ivorian, female, Casablanca, 22 November 2015). When I met her again in 2017, she had her residency and had left her old church and was in the process of starting her own church in another suburb of Casablanca (Interview 23, Ivorian, female, Casablanca, 1 October 2017). The members of this second church were mainly Ivorian and Cameroonian students and migrant workers, especially female housekeepers. Among them, some had just arrived and sometimes had contacted the church through social networks (Facebook in particular) before deciding to move to Morocco, which illustrates how these religious places connect also West African sending countries with Morocco.<sup>14</sup>

As in the case of the groups and individuals who meet around the tomb of Ahmad al-Tijani, the migration projects and aspirations of the members of these house churches are quite diverse. Again, it is clear that these religious places become nodes that support migration and mobility. Similarly, the establishment of West and Central African migrant churches in Morocco does not only encourage the permanent settlement and the integration of migrants but also supports multidirectional forms of mobility and circulation, as I will describe in the following section.

### ***Migrant Churches as Nodes and Connection Points for New Forms of Circulation in Morocco***

Besides their role as connection points for the circulation and installation of North-bound migrants in Morocco, the existence of these places today also facilitates the multidirectional mobility of images, individuals, and money. This circulation is

particularly important when the church becomes an intermediary for financial support from abroad. This is for example the case of a Congolese pastor, who, with the help of his mentor who left for France, made contact with a Pentecostal Nigerian church based in the United States. This Nigerian Church turned the house church into its North African branch and supported the pastor financially. This financial support initially enabled a move to a larger room entirely dedicated to church activities (Interview 19, Congolese, male, Rabat, 26 October 2016). Migrant churches in Morocco are thus networked with new church communities through the successful onward journey of their members to Europe where they got in touch with other Christian African diaspora members based elsewhere (here in the US). In this case, two migrants from the South with different migratory trajectories and places of residence (one based in Morocco and one based in the US) converge in a place in the South (Rabat) thanks to the networks built by religious fellows (the Congolese pastor who emigrated from Morocco to France) met during their respective journeys. This case shows how intracontinental African migration flows contribute to the establishment of complex religious networks that further shape multidirectional flows of individuals, ideas, and money.

At the same time, it is also a very common practice for preachers from the countries of origin (RDC and Ivory Coast) or Europe/North America (majority diaspora) to come to Morocco to organize religious events on religious leadership, healing, or the religious meaning of the blockades and struggle encountered as a migrant. Migration was generally positively valued during these gatherings, with Isaac and Job seen as models to follow to achieve the social and economic capital that the congregants aspire to (Berriane 2021). This circulation of preachers is often accompanied by the circulation of goods and money, thus also linking church communities in Morocco to different places in Africa and the North. In May 2016, the Nigerian supporter of the Congolese church described above came from the United States to Rabat to organize a five-day workshop on leadership (field notes, Rabat, May 2016). A few months earlier, this same church hosted two preachers from the Republic of the Congo, who, on their way to a religious meeting in France, had stopped in Rabat to organize a religious seminar. The visit of international preachers appears to be a common practice also in smaller and less prominent churches that welcomed preachers from France (interview 15, male, DRC, 30 June 2016) or the United Kingdom (interview 17, male, DRC, 26 October 2016). Sometimes the church based in Morocco becomes also a meeting point for preachers from different places. It was for example the case for an Ivorian church in Salé that became a regular gathering place for preachers from Ivory Coast and France who meet up in Morocco to preach together (Interview 23, male, Ivory Coast, 26 October 2017).<sup>15</sup>

Although Christianity does not have the same role for Moroccan society as Muslim Sufi orders such as the Tidjaniyya, the multidirectional circulation of Christian migrants and preachers has helped to integrate Morocco, or at least some of its suburbs, into transnational Christian territories. This perfectly reflects the complexity of Morocco's current migration pattern, mainly characterized by an overlapping of temporal installation and consciously planned immigration. The



charismatic migrant churches are therefore integrated in the transnational Christian spaces that encompass the migrants' countries of origin, Moroccan cities and the African diaspora communities in Europe, and North America. Besides showing the various forms and multidirectional dimension of migration in the country, the existence of these places and their transnational embeddedness within transnational Christian territories demonstrates perfectly how Morocco has been integrated with the imaginary worlds even for the people whose initial goal was to reach Europe.

## **Conclusion**

The examination of the links between South-South Migration and religious place-making in Morocco demonstrates the historical depth of these migratory movements and their embeddedness in longstanding circulations and translocal social spaces. At the same time, the development of West and Central African migration to Morocco is linked to various forms of mobility and changeable motivations that can be observed in the field of religion. The establishing of localities for religious practices is a privileged way for mobile people to both become locally present and transnationally connected. Indeed, religious institutions and places of worship can play a significant role as networks and nodes for circulation, contributing to the transnational expansion of these networks and the shaping of new social spaces. Similarly, the religious places used and shaped by West and Central African migrants in Moroccan urban settings do not only attract migrants coming from the South but drive multidirectional forms of circulation and mobility, between the Central and West African sending countries, urban districts in Morocco and African diaspora sites in Europe or North America.

In this way, the stay in Morocco cannot only be understood as a moment of in-between or of transition, a space only for transit. Whereby not every migrant or individual on the move stays voluntarily in Morocco, their presence contributes to shaping Moroccan urban places and to integrate these places into their sacred and social territories. This stay, which can become permanent or be temporal, has a social and spiritual meaning. It demonstrates perfectly how religious place-making can be on the one hand a sign for processes of stability (Halbwachs 1971 [1941]) and on the other hand a support for circulation (Bava 2005) which in this case is multidirectional (see also, Picard 2014).

While demonstrating the historical and cultural dimension of African migration to Morocco and to overcome a Eurocentric vision of today's trans-Saharan migration flows, the analysis of religious spaces in Morocco shows further the significant impact of African religious actors in the spreading of transnational religious movements within the African continent and beyond. African migrants and other mobile people have not only participated in re-shaping religious sites such as Christian churches or the Tidjani *zawiya* of Fès. They have also been able to revive and re-shape Christianity and the Tidjaniyya in Morocco and beyond, indicating their significant role for various South-South, South-North and North-South flows of global religious traditions.



## Notes

- 1 <https://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/discours-de-sm-le-roi-loccasion-du-38eme-anniversaire-de-la-marche-verte> (translation by the author)
- 2 There are a few exceptions such as Khrouz and Lanza 2015, Therrien and Pellegrini 2015, Berriane and Idrissi Janati 2016, or Péraldi and Terrazoni 2016.
- 3 Here, 'Morocco' is more of a starting point and should not be seen as a homogeneous space. Rather, the paper focuses on particular places (mostly cities or neighbourhoods) located in Morocco and that are interconnected.
- 4 Here, I understand social spaces as contexts of life and action that also include symbolic and imaginary geographies (Jackson et al. 2004 cited in Adogame 2020: 127).
- 5 This was the subject of the author's PhD thesis, defended at the Free University of Berlin in 2014 and published in 2016 (see Berriane 2016). The project has been supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).
- 6 This project was conducted at the International Migration Institute in Oxford, the Ecole d'Économie et de Gouvernance in Rabat and the German Historical Institutes in Paris. The fieldwork was financed by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Max Weber Foundation.
- 7 Sufi comes from Sufism, which is an Islamic form of mysticism that consists of initiation training and teaching designed to provide access to esoteric knowledge.
- 8 Rapport sur le pèlerinage de 1956 (CAOM 1AFFPOL/2226), Archives nationales d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence.
- 9 Rapport du Capitaine Cardaire, Commissaire du Gouvernement de l'AOF au pèlerinage de 1952 (CAOM 14MIOM/2839 – 19G11) ; Annexe n°2 du rapport de 1953, Compte-rendu du pèlerinage à Fèz des Pèlerins d'AOF au retour de La Mecque (CAOM 1 AFFPOL/2157) ; Rapport sur le pèlerinage maritime de 1954 (CAOM 1 AFFPOL/2157) ; Article de presse « 300 pèlerins quittent Dakar demain pour La Mecque », Paris-Dakar du 20 août 1956 (CAOM 1 AFFPOL/2226). Archives nationales d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence.
- 10 <https://lobservateur.info/article/105725/maroc/socieacuteteacute/les-africains-subsahariens-premiers-etudiants-etrangers-au-maroc>
- 11 This is the results of a study conducted as part of the research project "New Mobilities around Morocco viewed through the case of Fès" carried out in the frame of the programme "African Perspectives on Human Mobility" (Université Mohamed V Rabat and International Migration Institute Oxford).
- 12 The map is only a snapshot of the situation in 2015 and cannot illustrate the mobility and dynamism of the Christian place-making observed in Morocco since 2004. The map is based on the results of both the survey conducted in 2013 (Coyault 2014) and my fieldwork in 2015. For more details on the local impact and presence making of migrant churches in Morocco, see Berriane 2021.
- 13 Notwithstanding the existence of Moroccan Christians, who have become more vocal via online channels and virtual social networks, Christianity is still seen as the religion of foreigners. At the same time, Moroccan law does not allow Moroccan Muslims to convert, condemning Shia Islam and combating Christian proselytization mission.
- 14 For more details on this study, see Berriane 2020 and 2021.
- 15 For more details on this study, see Berriane 2020 and 2021.

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