On Campus

A Grand Entrance

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The organizers were worried. The conference was due to start, and the keynote speaker was nowhere in sight. But Mamadou Diouf, who is Leitner Family Professor of African Studies, was none too concerned — even if this was his first international conference as director of the Institute of African Studies at the School of International and Public Affairs.

“It’s very Senegalese to dramatize one’s entrance,” Diouf explained to the conference coordinators, never missing a professorial opportunity to analyze his own culture. “People have to wait for you and worry a little bit about whether you’re coming or not. It is an aspect of the social performance.” He added with a flip of his hand, “He’ll be here.”

Diouf was referring to Mansour Sy Djamil, caliph of the Seydi Moustapha Sy Jamil branch of the Tijanyya Sufi Brotherhood. Diouf invited Sy (pronounced “See”), whom he’d known since high school in Paris, as the keynote speaker to the conference “Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal” to add a theological perspective to a mostly political discussion. The Tijanyya, originating from 18th-century North Africa, had been an agent of opposition to French rule there. In Senegal, to which the sect had been introduced by Sy’s great-grandfather, the Tijanyya continued to broker for autonomy and representation, helping to bring about Senegal’s independence in 1960. These efforts contributed to the country’s becoming a stable democracy — a peculiarity in West Africa.

As Diouf hoped, word of Sy’s arrival drew members of Harlem’s Senegalese community to the conference that spring morning in the International Affairs Building. Women in long, bright boubous and men in muted tunics and slippers arrived to a lobby filled with students, Columbia faculty, and scholars from across

the United States.

Sy is different from most other caliphs because he left Senegal to study in Paris and Cairo. He also worked at the Islamic Development Bank in Jidda. He is an intellectual, known for spending long afternoons in bookstores wherever he travels. But he is also an engaged spiritual leader, heading two Sufi foundations now in Senegal. “He’s an original source to whom academics go for information,” said Diouf. “He’s like a reference in a text. He illuminates, but is still outside the main discussion.”

When Sy and his assistant first stepped off the elevator, it was impossible to tell leader from disciple. Both tall and draped in olive-green robes, they were surrounded by devotees and academics alike. But as one walked and the other lagged, it became clear who Sy was. The lobby filled with a low hum as Sy spoke, with an assured smile, to every guest, clasping his two hands around each of theirs. Diouf, moving quickly to greet his old friend, exclaimed to the volunteers, “You see, this is power — who has it, and who doesn’t!”

For Diouf, Sy’s entourage showed how a true leader commands power outside his own territory: He reproduces it. As Sy surely knows, a part of what makes the powerful powerful is the recognition of their followers’ desire to set them apart. In religion, it’s the sacred; in politics, it’s ceremonial; in practical terms, sometimes it’s business class.

This may be why, earlier that week, Sy upgraded the economy-class airline ticket that Columbia had provided him. “Universities are democratic institutions, and they must treat you like everybody else,” explained Diouf. “But for Sy, it’s a question of respectability, of what his followers expect of him.”

Sy’s request was not about a preference for reclining leather seats; rather, it demonstrated how well he understood his role as a leader — to be among, but separate from, his followers. Sy read in French when he’d presented his paper on Sufism, but he also tailored the discussion to each audience member he addressed, at times explicating in English and quoting from the Qur’an in Arabic, his finger circling instructively in the air. During the speeches that followed, Sy sat in the audience and periodically raised his hand, then stood to ask his questions, seizing every opportunity to better explain Senegalese history or Sufi theology.

After French philology and philosophy professor Souleymane Bachir Diagne made the conference's final presentation, Sy stood up for the last word. Diagne had described how postcolonial Senegal had adopted a social-secular government that accommodated all of the nation's religions, particularly the Sufi orders. Roots for this tolerance, Sy said, were found in Sufi theology itself. He recounted a story from the Hadith, in which the archangel Gabriel instructed the prophet Muhammad to welcome a non-Muslim to dinner, since he, too, was created by God. Like other religions, Sufism preaches that each individual, whether a believer or not, is part of God's ultimate creation. For Sy, this theology has nurtured a culture of generosity and hospitality toward other faiths, which translates into tolerance in Senegalese politics.

As the conference ended and the audience left for a Columbia-sponsored Sufi arts exhibition and recital at the Schomburg Center uptown, Sy slowly proceeded out of the lobby with some of his followers. He stopped every few steps to answer a question, only to pose another in response.

"He is the center," explained Diouf. "Everything is coming, and everything is disseminating through him. That's how it works."

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