



Women's Religious Authority and the Governance of Muslim Philanthropy: The Càntakun Succession Conflict in Senegal

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Abstract

Islamic Succession conflicts within Sufi brotherhoods in Senegal often expose tensions between competing forms of religious legitimacy, yet their implications for philanthropic governance and women's participation remain underexplored. This study examines the Caliphate succession conflict within the Càntakun community following the death of Sheikh Béthio Thioune, focusing on how competing legitimacy claims reshape religious authority, philanthropic governance, and gender relations. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research draws on twenty semi-structured interviews, five focus group discussions, and eight participant observations conducted across nine localities in Senegal. The findings reveal that the succession dispute is not merely a theological contest but a struggle over control of philanthropic resources, including *adiya*, donations, land, and diaspora networks. Sokhna Aida Diallo's claim to caliphal authority challenges patriarchal norms and expands women's participation in Muslim philanthropy, while Saliou Thioune's claim reinforces hereditary succession and institutional orthodoxy. The study argues that routinization of charismatic authority is a contested process shaped by gender dynamics, with significant implications for community participation and institutional continuity. These findings contribute to broader discussions on gender, religious authority, and philanthropic governance in Muslim societies.

Article History

Received: 21-05-2026

Revised: 23-06-2026

Accepted: 07-07-2026

Keywords

Caliphate succession, Càntakun, women's religious leadership, Muslim philanthropy, Senegal, routinization, gender and authority.

Introduction

Muslim philanthropy has long served as one of the most important institutional foundations for social welfare, civic participation, and community development across the Muslim world (Al-shammari, 2012; Putra et al., 2024). Beyond formal instruments such as *zakat*, *waqf*, *infaq*, and *ṣadaqah*, philanthropic practices are also embedded within religious organizations that mobilize financial resources, voluntary labour, and collective solidarity to address education, poverty alleviation, health, and social cohesion (Mukhid, 2024). In many Muslim societies, religious institutions function not merely as spiritual communities but



also as civil society organizations that organize citizen engagement, redistribute economic resources, and strengthen local governance (Tuğal, 2012; Zauro et al., 2020). Consequently, understanding how religious authority governs philanthropic resources has become increasingly important in contemporary debates on Muslim philanthropy, institutional governance, and community participation (Muhammad, 2013). While previous scholarship has extensively examined Islamic charitable institutions from legal, economic, and policy perspectives, comparatively less attention has been devoted to how leadership transitions within religious organizations influence philanthropic governance and the sustainability of community engagement (Hughes & Siddiqui, 2024; Rejosumarto & Bulut, 2024).

Among Muslim societies in Africa, Senegal provides one of the most compelling examples of the close relationship between religious authority and philanthropic governance (Leichtman, 2022; Warscheid, 2018). The Mouride brotherhood, founded by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, has developed into a highly influential religious institution whose activities extend beyond spiritual guidance to encompass education, agriculture, commerce, charitable redistribution, and community development (Jong, 2010; Swindell, 2019). Through extensive networks of disciples (*murīdūn*), religious schools (*daaras*), voluntary contributions (*adiya*), and diaspora remittances, the brotherhood mobilizes substantial philanthropic resources that support both religious and social welfare activities (Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University, Negara Brunei Darussalam & Mohiddin, 2019). Within this institutional setting, leadership succession is not solely a theological matter but also determines how charitable assets are administered, how communities participate in philanthropic activities, and how institutional legitimacy is maintained (Lindsay & Wuthnow, 2010; Osella, 2018). The succession conflict within the Cântakun community following the death of Sheikh Béthio Thioune therefore represents a significant case for examining the interaction between religious leadership, philanthropic governance, and citizen engagement (Brossier, 2014; Hughes & Siddiqui, 2024). More importantly, the emergence of Sokhna Aida Diallo as a female claimant to spiritual leadership challenges established patriarchal traditions while raising broader questions concerning gender, institutional legitimacy, and the governance of Muslim philanthropic resources.

Existing scholarship on Senegalese Sufism has generally developed along three major directions. First, numerous studies examine succession within Sufi brotherhoods as contests over charismatic authority, genealogical legitimacy, and institutional continuity, drawing extensively upon Weberian theories of charisma and routinization (Boubrik, 2000; Dozon, 2010; Hammoudi, 2001;

Weber, 1978). Second, a growing body of research investigates the economic and political influence of the Mouride order, highlighting its role in organizing transnational commercial networks, agricultural production, and community-based redistribution through religious institutions (Havard, 2007). Third, recent scholarship has increasingly explored women's participation within Sufi communities, emphasizing their contributions to religious networks, ritual activities, and social organization (Pezeril, 2007, 2008; Woodhead, 2012). Although these studies have significantly advanced understanding of religious authority and institutional development, they largely examine succession, gender, and philanthropy as separate analytical domains. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how succession conflicts reshape philanthropic governance, influence patterns of community participation, and redefine women's authority within Muslim philanthropic institutions.

Departing from these limitations, this study argues that leadership succession within the Càntakun community should be understood not merely as a struggle over religious authority but also as a contest over the governance of philanthropic resources, institutional legitimacy, and citizen engagement (Lederman, 2026; Phillips, 2018). The conflict between Sokhna Aida Diallo and Saliou Thioune demonstrates how competing claims of spiritual-conjugal legitimacy and biological-hereditary legitimacy shape the administration of charitable assets, community mobilization, and organizational continuity (Zhang et al., 2020). By integrating Weber's concepts of charisma, routinization, and domination with contemporary discussions on Muslim philanthropy and institutional governance, this study extends previous scholarship beyond questions of religious succession toward a broader understanding of how authority influences resource distribution, gender relations, and civic participation within Islamic organizations (Walton & McCarthy, 2002).

Accordingly, this study addresses three interrelated research questions. First, how do competing successors construct and legitimize their claims to religious authority, and how do these claims shape the governance of philanthropic resources within the Càntakun community? Second, how do succession strategies influence community participation, resource mobilization, and institutional continuity in the Mouride brotherhood? Third, how does the succession conflict reshape gender relations and expand women's participation in Muslim philanthropy and community engagement? By answering these questions, this study contributes to contemporary scholarship on Muslim philanthropy, religious leadership, and institutional governance by demonstrating that succession disputes within Sufi organizations constitute critical arenas through which authority, philanthropy, and community

engagement are continuously negotiated and transformed. Although situated in Senegal, the findings offer broader theoretical insights into the governance of Muslim philanthropic institutions that are relevant to Islamic organizations across the Global South, including Asia.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using an instrumental case study approach to investigate the succession conflict within the Cântakun religious community in Senegal following the death of its founder, Sheikh Béthio Thioune. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research seeks to understand the social meanings, institutional dynamics, and competing claims to religious authority that shape the governance of Muslim philanthropy rather than to establish causal relationships through quantitative measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study approach enables an in-depth examination of succession as a contemporary phenomenon situated within its real-life socio-religious context, allowing the interaction between religious legitimacy, gender, philanthropic governance, and community participation to be analyzed holistically (Yin, 2018).

Fieldwork was conducted across nine localities where the Cântakun movement maintains a significant organizational presence, namely Gueule-Tapée, Sicap Foire, Mermoz, Darou Salam, Dakhar Mbaye, Khelcom, Janatou Mahwa, Ngabou, and Mboro-Plage. These research sites were purposively selected because they represent the principal religious and organizational centers of the movement and accommodate followers affiliated with both competing leadership factions. Data were collected through three complementary qualitative techniques comprising twenty semi-structured interviews, five focus group discussions, and eight participant observations involving forty purposively selected participants. The participants included the two succession claimants, senior Mouride authorities, family members, religious leaders, spokespersons, disciples from both factions, diaspora representatives, and members of the wider community. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Wolof and French, audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Participant observations were documented through detailed field notes to capture ritual practices, leadership interactions, charitable activities, and everyday organizational life. The integration of multiple qualitative methods enabled the researcher to examine the succession conflict from various perspectives, including individual experiences, collective interpretations, and institutional dynamics, thereby strengthening the empirical richness of the study.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the empirical foundation of this study, [Table 1](#) presents the categories of research informants and the qualitative techniques through which data were generated. The table demonstrates that the study incorporated a diverse range of informants representing institutional authorities, competing leadership factions, family members, disciples, religious elites, diaspora communities, and the wider public. This diversity enabled the researcher to capture multiple perspectives on the succession conflict, extending beyond theological debates to include questions of institutional legitimacy, gender relations, philanthropic governance, and community participation. The use of interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation generated complementary forms of qualitative evidence that strengthened the empirical richness of the study and facilitated source triangulation.

Table 1
List of Research Informants

Code	Name	Category	Data Collection Techniques
INF-01	Sokhna Aida Diallo	Central Figure (Claimant: Wife and Disciple Legitimacy)	Interviews, Participant Observation
INF-02	Serigne Saliou Thioune	Central Figure (Claimant: Blood Legitimacy)	Interviews, Participant Observation
INF-03	Serigne Mountakha Mbacké	Highest Authority (General Caliph of the Mourides)	Official Statements (via representatives)
INF-04	Serigne Bassirou Mbacké	Representative of Highest Authority	Focus Group Discussion
INF-05	Sokhna Bator Saliou	Family Member (Supporter of Sokhna Aida Diallo)	Interviews, Focus Group Discussion, Participant Observation
INF-06	Adja Saliou	Family Member (Supporter of Sokhna Aida Diallo)	Interviews, Focus Group Discussion
INF-07	Serigne Saliou Samb	Spokesperson for Sokhna Aida Diallo	Interviews
INF-08	I-B	Communications Officer for Cântakun	Interviews
INF-09	Marabout Close to the Caliph	Mouride Religious Leader	Interviews
INF-10	Marabout from the Niassène Order	External Religious Observer	Interviews
INF-11	Imam from Touba	Religious Authority	Interviews
INF-12	Cântakun Disciple (Supporter of Saliou Thioune)	Talibé	Interviews, Focus Group Discussion

INF-13	Càntakun Disciple (Supporter of Sokhna Aida Diallo)	Talibé	Interviews, Focus Group Discussion
INF-14	Diaspora Disciple	Diaspora Follower	Interviews
INF-15	Community Member	General Public	Focus Group Discussion

Source: Developed by the authors based on fieldwork conducted in Senegal

Table 1 demonstrates that the study incorporated a diverse range of informants representing institutional authorities, competing leadership factions, family members, disciples, religious elites, diaspora communities, and the wider public. This diversity enabled the researcher to capture multiple perspectives on the succession conflict, extending beyond theological debates to include questions of institutional legitimacy, gender relations, philanthropic governance, and community participation. The use of interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation generated complementary forms of qualitative evidence that strengthened the empirical richness of the study and facilitated source triangulation.

The empirical materials were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytical framework. The analysis proceeded through four stages: familiarization with the data, systematic coding, theme development, and interpretative synthesis. Initial coding focused on concepts related to religious legitimacy, succession, charismatic authority, philanthropy, gender, and institutional continuity. These codes were subsequently organized into three major analytical themes: (1) Competing Religious Legitimacies and the Governance of Muslim Philanthropic Resources; (2) Succession Strategies, Community Participation, and Institutional Continuity; and (3) Gender, Institutional Transformation, and the Future of Muslim Philanthropy. The findings were interpreted through Max Weber's concepts of charismatic authority, routinization of charisma, and legitimate domination to explain how competing leadership claims reshape organizational governance, philanthropic institutions, and community engagement within the Càntakun movement.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed methodological triangulation by integrating interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, alongside source triangulation through comparisons among religious leaders, disciples, community representatives, and members of both competing factions (Denzin, 1978). The analysis was further strengthened through theoretical triangulation by combining Weber's sociology of authority with contemporary scholarship on Sufi institutions, Muslim philanthropy, gender, and religious leadership. Although the study focuses on a

single religious community, the systematic integration of multiple data sources and theoretical perspectives provides a robust methodological foundation for understanding how succession disputes reshape religious authority, philanthropic governance, and citizen engagement within contemporary Senegalese Sufism.

Competing Religious Legitimacies and the Governance of Muslim Philanthropic Resources

The Cântakun succession dispute demonstrates that religious authority within the Mouride brotherhood extends far beyond spiritual leadership. In Senegalese Sufism, the khalifa occupies a strategic institutional position that combines religious guidance with the governance of philanthropic resources, including *adiya* (voluntary religious offerings), charitable donations, *daaras* (Qur'anic schools), religious properties, and extensive networks of disciples both within Senegal and across the diaspora (Boubrik, 2000; Dozon, 2010). Consequently, succession disputes are not solely theological contests over spiritual legitimacy but also institutional struggles over who possesses the legitimate authority to mobilize, administer, and redistribute resources that sustain the social welfare functions of the community. This close relationship between religious leadership and philanthropic governance explains why leadership transitions within the Mouride order frequently generate broader institutional tensions affecting organizational continuity and community participation (Hammoudi, 2001; Havard, 2007).

A central pillar of this governance system is the institution of *adiya*, a voluntary form of religious giving through which disciples express devotion, loyalty, and spiritual commitment to their *cheikh*. Unlike conventional charitable donations that primarily address material needs, *adiya* represents a reciprocal religious relationship in which disciples provide material support while expecting spiritual guidance, prayers, and blessings from their religious leader (Pezeril, 2007; Ndiaye, 2009). Through this mechanism, philanthropic contributions become an integral component of religious life and institutional sustainability. The accumulation of these voluntary resources has enabled Mouride institutions to finance mosques, religious education, social assistance, infrastructure development, and numerous community welfare initiatives. The development of Touba into one of the largest religious cities in West Africa exemplifies how faith-based philanthropy has become a driving force in local economic development and social cohesion (Boubrik, 2000; Dozon, 2010). As one disciple explained, Cheikh Béthio Thioune's generosity attracted followers through substantial material support: "He had over a thousand plots of 500 square

meters in Touba; he kept one and gave the others to his talibés. He offered cars, paid school fees for vulnerable social groups, and offered plane tickets to travelers without tickets.” (INF-12, Càntakun Disciple, Interview, 2021).

Following the death of Sheikh Béthio Thioune, the governance of these philanthropic resources became inseparable from competing claims to religious legitimacy. Sokhna Aida Diallo grounded her leadership claim on spiritual intimacy and marital proximity to the founder, arguing that her appointment reflected a continuation of his charismatic authority rather than a departure from Mouride tradition (Pezeril, 2008). She emphasized that her husband had publicly entrusted her with spiritual responsibilities before his death, thereby constructing legitimacy through charismatic continuity and symbolic succession. As she stated in an interview: *“During his lifetime, my husband entrusted me with his caliphate and some of his wives and children. By next year, everyone will be convinced that Cheikh Béthio Thioune had chosen me as his successor.”* (INF-01, Sokhna Aida Diallo, Interview, 2021). Her spokesperson further elaborated on the nature of this designation: *“It is on February 14, 2016, from Paris and in the presence of Sokhna Bator Saliou, that Serigne Béthio declared to her: ‘You are me, I am you.’ He thus signifies that he designates her as the holder of his Reality.”* (INF-07, Serigne Saliou Samb, Interview, 2021). She also explained the internal organizational structure through which philanthropic governance was exercised: *“Following the mode of internal organization within the kurél, he had installed diawrignes. And as Diawrigne, he charged me to be in front of certain of his disciples.”* (INF-01, Sokhna Aida Diallo, Interview, 2021).

Continued expressions of loyalty from disciples, including voluntary financial contributions, ceremonial gifts, and sustained participation in religious gatherings, reinforced this claim by demonstrating that recognition of authority was reproduced through ongoing philanthropic relationships rather than formal institutional endorsement alone (Dozon, 2010). The material support she received from her disciples substantiated her claim to philanthropic authority. At the 2020 Magal of Touba, members of the *dahira* Nourou Darayni offered her a Lincoln Navigator vehicle and an *adiya* of 84 million CFA francs, while those of the *dahira* of Sokhna Bator gave her a house on the water with a pool and a 600m² plot in Almadies, an upscale neighborhood of Dakar. Another widow, Sokhna Adja Saliou, handed over an *adiya* of 55 million CFA francs (Havard, 2007). These donations demonstrate the economic resources that flow to those recognized as legitimate spiritual authorities and constitute the ongoing reproduction of a philanthropic system in which the female *cheikh* serves as the central node for resource mobilization and redistribution.

Conversely, Saliou Thioune advanced a competing model of legitimacy grounded in hereditary succession and institutional recognition. As the eldest son of the founder, he invoked genealogical continuity as the appropriate basis for leadership transition, a principle that has historically shaped succession within many Senegalese Sufi communities (Hammoudi, 2001). His recognition by the General Caliph of the Mouride order further strengthened this claim by aligning it with established institutional norms governing religious authority. This endorsement not only validated his spiritual position but also reinforced his authority to oversee the institutional structures through which philanthropic resources are collected, administered, and redistributed across the Mouride network (Boubrik, 2000; Dozon, 2010). He asserted his position unequivocally: *"I am the Khalife of Cheikh Béthio and if someone else claims it, they should know the reasons."* (INF-02, Serigne Saliou Thioune, Interview, 2021). The communications officer for the Cântakun movement explained the basis of Saliou Thioune's legitimacy: *"There was a form of immediate fascination, like love at first sight. After meeting Serigne Saliou Mbacké, Cheikh Béthio Thioune loved him with a love that surpassed that which he bore for his parents. Béthio Thioune, who then knew nothing about Islam, trained under the religious figure, whom he saw during holidays, while he himself attended French school. Quickly, he gained influence, to the point of gathering many followers and being elevated to the rank of shaykh in 1987."* (INF-08, I-B, Communications Officer, Interview, 2021).

The General Caliph's representative conveyed the institutional position regarding the succession: *"He asked her to align herself behind Serigne Saliou Thioune, current caliph of Cheikh Bethio Thioune, in accordance with the directions of Serigne Mountakha Mbacké."* (INF-04, Serigne Bassirou Mbacké, Focus Group Discussion, 2021). These competing forms of legitimacy reveal that succession within the Cântakun movement is fundamentally a contest over institutional governance rather than merely a dispute concerning spiritual leadership. Each claimant sought to consolidate authority by mobilizing disciples, maintaining religious ceremonies, and strengthening organizational networks capable of sustaining philanthropic activities. In this context, charitable resources functioned not simply as economic assets but also as instruments through which symbolic authority was translated into organizational legitimacy and public recognition. Philanthropic governance therefore became a central arena in which competing leadership claims were continuously negotiated through everyday religious practice and community participation.

From a Weberian perspective, this conflict reflects the process through which charismatic authority undergoes routinization after the death of a founding leader (Weber, 1978). While the founder's personal charisma

previously unified the community, succession required that authority be institutionalized through alternative sources of legitimacy. Sokhna Aida Diallo attempted to preserve charismatic continuity through personal spiritual designation, whereas Saliou Thioune emphasized hereditary succession supported by institutional recognition. Rather than producing a clear transfer of authority, these competing strategies generated overlapping systems of legitimacy that simultaneously challenged and reinforced existing institutional arrangements. The succession dispute therefore illustrates that routinization is neither automatic nor uncontested but unfolds through continuous negotiation among symbolic authority, organizational structures, and collective recognition.

More broadly, the Càntakun case demonstrates that Muslim philanthropy cannot be understood solely in terms of charitable giving or resource distribution. Instead, philanthropic governance is deeply embedded within systems of religious legitimacy that determine who possesses the authority to mobilize donations, manage institutions, coordinate community welfare, and represent the moral interests of the religious community. The succession conflict thus reveals how struggles over religious authority simultaneously reshape patterns of philanthropy, institutional governance, and citizen engagement. By highlighting the interaction between charisma, hereditary legitimacy, and organizational authority, this case contributes to broader discussions concerning the governance of Muslim philanthropic institutions and the transformation of religious leadership in contemporary African Islam.

Succession Strategies, Community Participation, and Institutional Continuity

The succession dispute between Sokhna Aida Diallo and Saliou Thioune extends beyond competing claims to religious leadership. It represents a broader contest over the organization of community participation, the mobilization of philanthropic resources, and the preservation of institutional continuity within the Càntakun movement. In the Mouride brotherhood, religious authority is inseparable from the governance of collective resources because the khalifa occupies a central position in coordinating charitable contributions, directing religious institutions, and organizing communal activities. Consequently, leadership succession determines not only who exercises spiritual authority but also who acquires the legitimacy to administer philanthropic assets and sustain the organizational life of the community (Boubrik, 2000; Dozon, 2010). The Càntakun case therefore illustrates how succession processes become institutional mechanisms through which Muslim philanthropy and community engagement are continuously negotiated.

Collective participation has historically been one of the principal strengths of the Mouride philanthropic tradition. This is particularly evident during the annual Grand Magal of Touba, one of the largest religious gatherings in West Africa, which attracts millions of pilgrims from Senegal and the global Mouride diaspora. Beyond its religious significance, the Magal functions as an institutional platform for mobilizing financial resources, strengthening solidarity among disciples, and reinforcing the legitimacy of religious leadership (Babou, 2007; Perkins, 2022). The organization of the pilgrimage depends on extensive collaboration among *talibés*, *dahiras* (religious associations), community organizations, and diaspora networks that collectively finance public facilities, religious infrastructure, and various social welfare programs (Toure, 2021). Through this annual event, philanthropy is practiced not simply as individual charity but as collective participation that reinforces institutional cohesion and strengthens the social foundations of the Mouride order. As one community member observed: *“The Magal is not just a pilgrimage; it is the moment when the entire community comes together to reaffirm its unity and contribute to the development of Touba. Without the collective participation of the disciples, nothing would be possible.”* (INF-15, Community Member, Focus Group Discussion, 2021).

Within the Cântakun community, community participation is further institutionalized through the *cànte* ceremony, which combines religious devotion with collective resource mobilization. During these gatherings, disciples publicly reaffirm their loyalty to their spiritual guide through prayers, symbolic allegiance, and voluntary contributions in the form of *adiya* and other material gifts (Pezeril, 2008). These practices function not only as expressions of personal faith but also as mechanisms for sustaining religious institutions and financing community activities. A disciple explained the significance of these gatherings: *“The cànte is the moment when we show our gratitude to the guide. We come together, we sing, we dance, and we offer what we can. It is a way of saying that we are with him, that we recognize his authority, and that we will continue to support the community.”* (INF-13, Cântakun Disciple Supporter of Sokhna Aida, Interview, 2021).

The growing use of digital communication has further expanded participation by enabling disciples living outside Senegal to remain connected with religious activities and contribute to organizational programs, thereby extending the philanthropic network beyond national boundaries (Havard, 2007). A diaspora disciple confirmed this transnational connection: *“Even though I live in Europe, I remain connected to the Cântakun community through online platforms. I follow the ceremonies, I receive the teachings, and I contribute financially to the activities. The guide is always present, even from a distance.”* (INF-14, Diaspora Disciple, Interview, 2021). An equally important institutional mechanism is

the *dahira*, a voluntary association that organizes religious activities while coordinating collective fundraising and community development initiatives. These associations channel financial contributions toward educational institutions, healthcare facilities, religious infrastructure, and social assistance programs, illustrating how Muslim philanthropy within the Mouride tradition is organized through collective action rather than individual giving alone (Babou, 2007; Toure, 2021). The success of numerous development projects in Touba demonstrates the effectiveness of this participatory model, in which religious commitment, social solidarity, and economic cooperation operate simultaneously to strengthen community welfare. A leader of one *dahira* explained: *"The dahira is the backbone of our community. We collect contributions from members, we organize activities, and we ensure that the funds reach those who need them most. Without the dahiras, the community would not be able to sustain itself."* (INF-12, Cântakun Disciple Supporter of Saliou Thioune, Interview, 2021).

The succession conflict, however, has disrupted these well-established patterns of participation and resource governance. Sokhna Aida Diallo's assumption of religious leadership challenged the institutional structures through which philanthropic resources had traditionally been administered. By accepting allegiance from disciples, presiding over religious ceremonies, and receiving voluntary donations, she exercised functions that had historically been associated with recognized male religious authorities (Dozon, 2010; Pezeril, 2008). This development generated institutional resistance from the Mouride hierarchy, which regarded her activities as inconsistent with established norms governing religious succession (Boubrik, 2000). As a result, disciples and local religious associations increasingly found themselves divided between competing leadership claims, creating uncertainty regarding the legitimate destination of charitable contributions and weakening the organizational cohesion that had previously characterized the movement. One disciple expressed this dilemma: *"We are faced with a difficult choice. On one side, we have the eldest son, recognized by the Caliph of Touba. On the other side, we have the widow, who claims that she was designated by the Sheikh himself. Both have their arguments, and we do not know which path to follow."* (INF-12, Cântakun Disciple Supporter of Saliou Thioune, Interview, 2021).

A family member supporting Sokhna Aida described the tensions that emerged: *"Fam Samb, better known as Serigne Saliou Gueule Tapée, came to my house, accompanied by his brothers and talibés. They wanted to enter my house, to which the person they found there opposed. They insulted her, beat her, and uttered death threats against her. This situation persists and risks ending badly if nothing is done. They ask us*

to return the goods the Shaykh left us." (INF-05, Sokhna Bator Saliou, Interview, 2021). The effects of the succession dispute were particularly visible within transnational diaspora networks. Mouride communities in Europe, North America, and other regions have long served as important contributors to religious education, social welfare, and infrastructure development in Senegal through regular financial support (Babou, 2007; Perkins, 2022). These overseas communities traditionally maintained strong organizational ties with recognized religious leaders, ensuring the continuity of philanthropic initiatives across national borders. The emergence of rival leadership claims, however, introduced competing channels of authority that required diaspora members to determine which leader deserved their allegiance and financial support. This fragmentation had important implications for the long-term sustainability of philanthropic programs and the institutional unity of the Càntakun movement.

From a Weberian perspective, these developments reflect the challenges associated with the routinization of charismatic authority. Weber argues that charismatic organizations can survive the death of their founder only when charisma is successfully transformed into stable institutional authority through accepted rules of succession (Weber, 1978). The Càntakun movement illustrates the complexity of this transition. Rather than producing consensus, the succession process generated competing interpretations of legitimate authority that challenged organizational stability and disrupted established mechanisms of community participation (Hammoudi, 2001). A marabout close to the General Caliph observed: *"Controversial and contentious, Cheikh Béthio Thioune and his widow revive the question of succession legitimacy within the Mouride order. But the problem here is more related to the personality of the protagonists than to the question of women's place."* (INF-09, Marabout Close to the Caliph, Interview, 2021).

Consequently, institutional continuity depended not only on preserving the founder's symbolic legacy but also on maintaining the collective trust required to sustain philanthropic governance and organizational legitimacy. As one disciple explained: *"One conforms to the words of the general caliph of the Mourides Serigne Mountakha Mbacké and we rejoice in it. He is the caliph of Serigne Touba and we, as Mourides, can only conform to his words."* (INF-12, Càntakun Disciple Supporter of Saliou Thioune, Interview, 2021).

Overall, the Càntakun succession conflict demonstrates that community participation, philanthropic governance, and institutional continuity are deeply interconnected within Senegalese Sufism. Religious ceremonies, collective associations, and diaspora networks function simultaneously as spaces of worship, mechanisms of resource mobilization, and institutions of social solidarity. When religious legitimacy becomes contested, these interconnected

systems are likewise affected, reshaping patterns of participation, charitable giving, and organizational governance. The case therefore highlights that the sustainability of Muslim philanthropic institutions depends not only on economic resources but also on the continued recognition of legitimate religious authority capable of maintaining collective participation and institutional cohesion.

Gender, Religious Leadership, and the Transformation of Muslim Philanthropic Governance

The succession conflict within the Cântakun community marks a significant turning point in the development of Muslim philanthropy in Senegal. More than a dispute over religious leadership, the contest surrounding Sokhna Aida Diallo's claim to the caliphate raises broader questions concerning gender, institutional authority, and the governance of philanthropic resources within the Mouride brotherhood. In the Mouride tradition, the authority of a khalīfa is inseparable from the management of community assets, including *adiya* (voluntary religious offerings), charitable donations, *daaras* (Qur'anic schools), land, and financial contributions from transnational diaspora networks (Boubrik, 2000; Dozon, 2010). Consequently, claiming religious authority also entails claiming responsibility for directing charitable activities, coordinating community welfare, and safeguarding institutional continuity. By presenting herself as the legitimate successor to Sheikh Béthio Thioune, Sokhna Aida Diallo simultaneously challenged the patriarchal foundations of religious authority and the long-established gender hierarchy underpinning philanthropic governance.

Unlike conventional portrayals of women as supporters of religious institutions, Sokhna Aida Diallo positioned herself as an active religious leader responsible for organizing disciples, mobilizing charitable resources, and sustaining the social mission of the Cântakun movement. Her leadership combines spiritual guidance with institutional management, illustrating how religious authority can function alongside philanthropic administration (Pezeril, 2008). Reflecting on the organizational responsibilities entrusted to her, she explained: *"Following the mode of internal organization within the kurél, he had installed diawrignes. And as Diawrigne, he charged me to be in front of certain of his disciples."* (INF-01, Sokhna Aida Diallo, Interview, 2021). This testimony indicates that her role within the organization was established before Sheikh Béthio Thioune's death, providing an important basis for her subsequent claim to succession.

Her legitimacy has also been reinforced through the continued support of disciples who recognize her spiritual authority through substantial philanthropic

contributions. During the 2020 Magal of Touba, followers presented her with a Lincoln Navigator and significant *adiya* contributions amounting to more than 139 million CFA francs (Havard, 2007). Such donations are not merely symbolic expressions of personal loyalty; rather, they illustrate how recognition of religious authority is continually reproduced through philanthropic practices that sustain institutional life. As one disciple stated: *"We offered her a Lincoln Navigator and an adiya of 84 million CFA francs. It is our way of showing our loyalty and our recognition of her as the legitimate successor of Cheikh Béthio."* (INF-13, Cântakun Disciple Supporting Sokhna Aida, Interview, 2021). These practices demonstrate that charitable giving within the Cântakun movement simultaneously functions as an expression of devotion, a mechanism of institutional support, and a public affirmation of leadership legitimacy.

Sokhna Aida Diallo's activities further reveal that her leadership extends well beyond the collection of donations. She has actively expanded the community's philanthropic engagement by organizing food distribution for *daaras*, providing assistance to prisons during religious celebrations, and participating in initiatives addressing public health and community welfare. Her appearance at the Africa Health Innovations forum in New York, where she emphasized maternal and child health as a religious and humanitarian responsibility, illustrates an understanding of philanthropy that integrates faith, social welfare, and civic engagement. These initiatives broaden the traditional scope of religious leadership by positioning the *cheikh* not only as a spiritual guide but also as a social actor committed to improving community well-being. From a theoretical perspective, Sokhna Aida Diallo's leadership reflects what Pezeril (2008) and Woodhead (2012) describe as hegemonic femininity, whereby women negotiate authority within existing religious structures rather than rejecting them outright. She performs core caliphal functions, including receiving allegiance, presiding over ceremonies, managing donations, and guiding disciples, while simultaneously grounding her legitimacy in Mouride tradition. Rather than positioning herself outside established religious norms, she argues that her authority derives directly from Sheikh Béthio Thioune's personal designation. This claim was reinforced by her spokesperson, who recalled: *"It is on February 14, 2016, from Paris and in the presence of Sokhna Bator Saliou, that Serigne Béthio declared to her: 'You are me, I am you.' He thus signifies that he designates her as the holder of his Reality."* (INF-07, Serigne Saliou Samb, Interview, 2021). This narrative portrays succession as a continuation of charismatic authority instead of a rupture with Mouride orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, her claim has generated considerable resistance from established religious authorities. Representatives of the General Caliph insisted

that she recognize Serigne Saliou Thioune as the legitimate successor, reflecting the institutional preference for hereditary succession within the Mouride order. As one representative explained: *“He asked her to align herself behind Serigne Saliou Thioune, current caliph of Cheikh Béthio Thioune, in accordance with the directions of Serigne Mountakha Mbacké.”* (INF-04, Serigne Bassirou Mbacké, Focus Group Discussion, 2021).

Similarly, an Imam from Touba argued that leadership should remain within established male succession patterns, emphasizing that women may inherit disciples only under exceptional circumstances and should not lead mixed religious congregations (INF-11, Interview, 2021). These responses demonstrate that opposition to Sokhna Aida Diallo’s leadership extends beyond theological interpretation and reflects broader institutional concerns regarding authority, legitimacy, and organizational continuity. Despite this resistance, the historical experience of Islam demonstrates that women’s leadership in religious and philanthropic spheres is neither unprecedented nor incompatible with Islamic tradition. Figures such as Khadija bint Khuwaylid and Fatimah al-Fihri illustrate the longstanding contributions of Muslim women to charitable work, education, and community development. Within Senegal itself, women have long participated in Sufi organizations through religious associations, economic contributions, and educational activities (Pezeril, 2007; Woodhead, 2012). Contemporary examples such as Seyda Rokhaya Ibrahima Niass further demonstrate that women can occupy positions of respected religious authority while simultaneously leading philanthropic initiatives. Against this historical backdrop, Sokhna Aida Diallo’s leadership represents less a departure from Islamic tradition than an extension of an existing, though often overlooked, legacy of female religious leadership.

Her emergence has also expanded opportunities for women to participate more actively in the governance of Muslim philanthropy. Support from women disciples and family members indicates that her leadership has encouraged broader involvement in institutional decision-making and charitable activities. As Sokhna Bator Saliou observed: *“Even if some people want to oppose Cheikh Béthio’s will, everyone knows that the late guide of the Càntakun had already designated his successor. And no one will be able to deceive the followers about the choice of their marabout.”* (INF-05, Sokhna Bator Saliou, Interview, 2021). Such expressions of support illustrate that the succession conflict has become a catalyst for renegotiating women’s place within religious institutions and the governance of philanthropic resources.

At the same time, the case reveals the enduring structural constraints confronting female religious leadership. Critics continue to argue that Sokhna

Aida Diallo's public religious practices diverge from accepted Mouride norms, while others interpret the dispute primarily as a conflict over institutional legitimacy rather than gender itself. A marabout close to the General Caliph remarked: *"Controversial and contentious, Cheikh Béthio Thioune and his widow revive the question of succession legitimacy within the Mouride order. But the problem here is more related to the personality of the protagonists than to the question of women's place."* (INF-09, Marabout Close to the Caliph, Interview, 2021). Although such critiques remain influential, they have not diminished the significance of Sokhna Aida Diallo's contribution. Her leadership has stimulated national debate regarding women's religious authority and demonstrated that philanthropic governance within contemporary Senegalese Sufism is increasingly becoming a site where questions of gender, legitimacy, and institutional transformation are actively negotiated. In this respect, the Càntakun succession conflict illustrates how the evolution of Muslim philanthropy is inseparable from broader debates over religious leadership, social inclusion, and community participation.

Theoretical Analysis: Weberian Perspectives on Charismatic Authority, Routinization, and the Governance of Muslim Philanthropy

The Càntakun succession conflict provides a compelling empirical case for examining Max Weber's theory of authority and domination, particularly his concepts of charismatic authority, traditional authority, and the routinization of charisma. Weber argued that charismatic authority, legitimacy derived from belief in the extraordinary qualities of a leader, is inherently unstable and must undergo "routinization" to survive the leader's death, transforming personal charisma into institutional authority based on tradition or rational-legal rules (Weber, 1978). The Càntakun case illustrates that routinization is neither automatic nor uncontested; rather, it unfolds through continuous negotiation among competing claims to legitimacy, with gender serving as a critical dimension of this process.

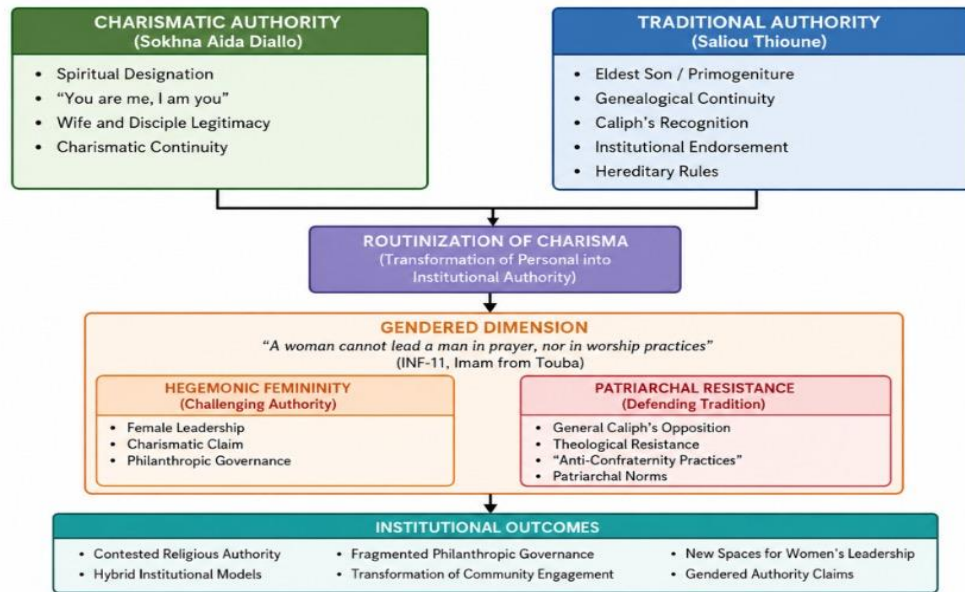
Sokhna Aida Diallo's claim to caliphal authority exemplifies Weber's concept of charismatic authority, which rests on "devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person" (Weber, 1978). Her legitimacy is not derived from institutional rules or hereditary tradition but from her personal relationship with the founder, her status as the designated successor of Sheikh Béthio Thioune, a disciple of Serigne Saliou Mbacké, and a spiritual guide within the Mouride tradition. As her spokesperson explained, *"It is on February 14, 2016, from Paris and in the presence of Sokhna Bator Saliou, that Serigne Béthio declared to her: 'You are me, I am you.' He thus signifies that he designates her as the holder of his Reality"* (INF-07, Serigne Saliou Samb,

[Interview, 2021](#)). This claim reflects Weber's insight that charismatic authority derives from "a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" ([Weber, 1978](#)). The recognition of this charisma by followers is not a matter of democratic choice but a duty for those who are chosen, a "completely personal abandon, full of faith, born either from enthusiasm or from necessity and hope" ([Weber, 1978](#)).

Conversely, Saliou Thioune's claim represents traditional authority, where legitimacy is based on "the sanctity of age-old rules and powers" ([Weber, 1978](#)). His assertion of primogeniture reflects the patriarchal tradition that has historically governed succession in Senegalese Sufi orders, a system where "*the eldest son of a marabout becomes one in turn when his father dies*" ([INF-11, Imam from Touba, Interview, 2021](#)). Under traditional authority, the master is designated according to traditional rules and obeyed because of his traditional status; obedience is owed not to enacted rules but to the person who occupies a position of authority by tradition ([Weber, 1978](#)). The General Caliph's recognition of Saliou Thioune as the legitimate successor represents an institutional attempt to routinize the founder's charisma through traditional hereditary rules, what Weber described as the process by which "charismatic authority is succeeded by a bureaucracy controlled by a rationally established authority or by a combination of traditional and bureaucratic authority" ([Weber, 1978](#)).

The Cântakun succession conflict shows that routinization, transforming personal charisma into institutional authority, is contested. As Weber argued, "every system of authority attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy" ([Weber, 1978](#)). Sokhna Aida Diallo sought charismatic continuity through spiritual designation, while Saliou Thioune pursued routinization through hereditary succession. These competing claims generated overlapping legitimacy systems that challenged and reinforced institutional arrangements. The gendered dimension reveals an overlooked aspect of Weber: authority and gender. Sokhna Aida Diallo claims charismatic authority in a system where traditional authority has been exclusively male. Her performance of caliphal functions, accepting allegiance, leading ceremonies, receiving donations, challenges the masculinist model of philanthropic governance ([Dozon, 2010](#)). Yet she grounds her legitimacy in Mouride tradition as designated successor and disciple. The General Caliph's response, demanding conformity to Islamic prescriptions and threatening exclusion, shows how women's claims threaten institutional foundations ([Boubrik, 2000](#)). This demonstrates that routinization unfolds through continuous negotiation among charismatic legitimacy, traditional rules, and gendered power relations.

Figure 1
Weberian Framework of Càntakun Succession Conflict



Source: Author's conceptualization based on Max Weber's theory of authority and domination.

Figure 1 presents a simplified conceptual framework that synthesizes Max Weber's theory of authority and domination with the empirical case of the Càntakun succession conflict. The upper section illustrates the two competing forms of legitimate authority: charismatic authority (embodied by Sokhna Aida Diallo) and traditional authority (embodied by Saliou Thioune). These two claims interact in the process of routinization, where the founder's personal charisma is transformed into institutional authority. The gendered dimension is highlighted through the tension between hegemonic femininity (challenging patriarchal norms) and patriarchal resistance (defending traditional authority). The framework concludes with the institutional outcomes of this conflict, demonstrating that succession struggles in Sufi orders simultaneously reshape religious authority, philanthropic governance, and community engagement.

Weber's concept of rationalization, the historical process through which traditional and charismatic authority give way to rational-legal systems, illuminates how Sokhna Aida Diallo's leadership, despite being contested, introduces new forms of institutional organization. Her management of disciples, collection of donations, and organization of community activities represent a hybrid model combining charismatic legitimacy with professional administration. This reflects what Weber described as the tension between different forms of authority in periods of institutional transformation. As one

disciple described her approach: *"She goes to the prisons, to the hospitals, to the poorest neighborhoods. She speaks to the youth, to those who have lost their way. She tells them that there is hope, that the path of Cheikh Béthio is still open"* (INF-13, Cântakun Disciple Supporter of Sokhna Aida, Interview, 2021).

In conclusion, the Cântakun succession conflict illustrates that routinization is neither automatic nor uncontested but unfolds through continuous negotiation among symbolic authority, organizational structures, and collective recognition. The gendered dimension of this conflict reveals that women's claims to charismatic authority challenge not only specific succession arrangements but also the patriarchal foundations of traditional authority systems. Sokhna Aida Diallo's leadership demonstrates that the transformation of Muslim philanthropy through women's religious leadership is possible, but it faces persistent challenges from institutional authorities that view women's religious authority as a violation of established norms. As the BBC reported, the question of whether a woman can lead a religious community in Senegal has sparked a national debate, with some scholars arguing that women have a "role indispensable" in Islam and have the duty to lead other women if they have the competence, while others maintain that a woman cannot lead a mixed group of men and women. Sokhna Aida Diallo's leadership continues to challenge these boundaries, expanding the scope of women's participation in Muslim philanthropy and community engagement in Senegal (Pezeril, 2008; Woodhead, 2012).

The Cântakun case thus demonstrates that Muslim philanthropy cannot be understood solely in terms of charitable giving or resource distribution; rather, philanthropic governance is deeply embedded within systems of religious legitimacy that determine who possesses the authority to mobilize donations, manage institutions, coordinate community welfare, and represent the moral interests of the religious community. By highlighting the interaction between charisma, hereditary legitimacy, gender, and organizational authority, this case contributes to broader discussions concerning the governance of Muslim philanthropic institutions and the transformation of religious leadership in contemporary African Islam.

Conclusion

This study has examined the Caliphate succession conflict within the Cântakun community in Senegal, revealing how the death of Sheikh Béthio Thioune has generated a struggle between two competing forms of legitimacy: spiritual-conjugal (embodied by Sokhna Aida Diallo) and biological-hereditary (embodied by Saliou Thioune). The analysis demonstrates that succession is not merely a

technical issue of leadership transition but a site of intense negotiation over religious authority, gender norms, philanthropic governance, and institutional continuity within the Mouride brotherhood. Religious authority in the Mouride system is inseparable from the governance of philanthropic resources, including *adiya*, donations, land, and transnational diaspora networks. The succession struggle is therefore a contest over who possesses the legitimate authority to mobilize, administer, and redistribute resources that sustain the community's social welfare functions. The strategies employed by both claimants, consolidating and contestatory, have disrupted established patterns of community participation, resource mobilization, and institutional continuity, creating fragmentation within diaspora networks and uncertainty among disciples regarding the legitimate destination of their charitable contributions.

Through the lens of Max Weber's theory of authority and domination, this study demonstrates that routinization, the transformation of personal charisma into institutional authority, is neither automatic nor uncontested but unfolds through continuous negotiation among charismatic legitimacy, traditional rules, and gendered power relations. Sokhna Aida Diallo's claim to caliphal authority represents a transformative moment in the history of Muslim philanthropy in Senegal, challenging patriarchal assumptions and expanding women's participation in philanthropic governance. Her leadership demonstrates the potential for women's religious authority to reshape patterns of philanthropy, community engagement, and institutional continuity in Muslim societies. However, this transformation faces persistent challenges from institutional authorities that view women's religious authority as a violation of established norms. The Cântakun case thus contributes to broader discussions concerning the governance of Muslim philanthropic institutions and the transformation of religious leadership in contemporary African Islam, highlighting that the sustainability of Muslim philanthropic institutions depends not only on economic resources but also on the continued recognition of legitimate religious authority capable of maintaining collective participation and institutional cohesion.

Acknowledgment

The author(s) would like to express sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their valuable time, insightful comments, and constructive suggestions. The critical feedback provided has significantly contributed to enhancing the clarity, depth, and academic rigor of this article. The author(s) remain grateful for the reviewers' commitment to academic excellence and their generous contribution to the refinement of this work.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical Approval

This study involved primary data collection through field research with human participants. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews and observations were conducted. The identities of participants have been anonymized, and all data were treated confidentially in accordance with accepted ethical principles for social science research.

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