Connected Female Sufi Disciples: The Workings of Social Online Communities in a Transnational Sufi Order

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Abstract: Two decades ago, research on diasporic women’s participation within Sufi circles would have been inconceivable, not only because of a general lack of recognition of their contribution to Sufism but due to the intimacy of the rituals, often taking place in confined spaces, like zawiyas (Sufi lodges). Recent scholarly attention to female spiritual experience owes to a digital awareness and interest in exploring diasporic community reproduction of those experiences. Within a context where female disciples of a Sufi convent undergo a physical separation from the saint’s sanctuary - because of immigration from the homeland to the host country - technology becomes a social hub accounting for Sufis’ ritual commitment and preservation of cultural capital in the diaspora. This paper elucidates how female Sufi immigrants affiliating with the Boudchichi brotherhood (Morocco-based) maintain ‘a relational network’ and strong social online relationships with their female compatriots in Morocco through the use of online platforms. Sufi communities living in the diaspora find the internet an open interactive space that serves to kindle their distance of spiritual participation and corroborate their transnational belonging. The current paper explores the implications of the use of a digital baseline named “Tariqa Info,” the convent’s digital online platform, and how it mediates everyday ritual performance, the promotion of digital connection, and the communication of ideas and discourses. Such a platform serves the bolstering emotional bonds for transnational female disciples and inclusion within online communities in the homeland. Assisted by an ethnographic lens, this paper discusses the research findings of participatory field observation of Sufi women’s online communities, informed by the need to trace the many ostensible aspects of interconnectedness and divergences.

Keywords: digital connection, Sufi convent, social online relationship, transnational female disciples

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