

# A Celebration of Female Sainthood in West Africa

## Sokhna Mame Diarra Bousso 1833-1866

*By Michelle R. Kimball*



According to traditional sources Mame Diarra<sup>1</sup> of Senegal, was a woman of great piety. She is considered to have had the divine light of *barakah* (power and blessing) and was given the praise name “*Diarraatullah*,” (The one who is close to God).

Mame Diarra had four outstanding children: Serigne Mame Mor Diarra (a.k.a. Boroum Sam), the eldest son who is said to have prayed 100 *rakats*<sup>2</sup> each night, Serigne Habīballah and Sokhna Fâtý Mbacké, who both passed away at an early age. She is also, most notably, the mother of Shaykh Amadou Bamba Mbacké<sup>3</sup> (1854-1927), founder of the Muridiyyah Sufi Order. He is revered, especially in Senegal, for leading a nonviolent

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<sup>1</sup> *Diarra*, is pronounced “Jara” in Arabic, and means “neighbor,” or “close to.”

<sup>2</sup> A *rakat* (Arabic) is a cycle of ritual prayer in Islam.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba and his legacy, see: Kimball, Michelle R. (2010) “The Pen and the Cannon: Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba’s Nonviolent Jihad” in *Sacred Web*, vol 24. pp. 80-106

movement to resist French colonialism and revive the tradition of Islam.

Her father, Mame Muhammad Bousso and her mother, Sokhna Asta Walo Mbacké, belonged to the Toucouleurs ethnic group of Senegal. Originally from Guéde,<sup>4</sup> they left because of political unease in the region, and went to Cayor to live by teaching the Quran. The Bousso are known to be a very erudite and pious Muslim family. Like the Mbacké family women the Bousso family women are known for an unusual knowledge of the Quran, as both belong to a family of Quranic scholars.

Both Mame Diarra's mother and father were deeply religious. Her father was a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad through his grandson, Hassan. Mame Diarra's mother, Sokhna Asta Walo Mbacké, was said to be an unusual character, and consummate religious studies teacher who spoke with authority. In class she wore clothes that resembled the men's *jellabas*.<sup>5</sup> She is said to have lived to be one hundred and thirty eight. She would spend the night in prayer, and taught many people the Holy Quran. She made sure that Mame Diarra became learned in Islam. Mame Diarra was as pious as her mother and learned to read the Quran when she was only 10 years old. She mastered certain domains of Islamic science by the time she turned nineteen. A mere three years later, she had "assimilated *Tasawwuf* [Sufism] that is a long path, fraught with pitfalls."<sup>6</sup>

"Initiation into the Truth consists of the profession of divine unity (*tawhid*), adherence to the legal doctrine

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<sup>4</sup> In Fouta Toro - the region on the Senegal River in what is now northern Senegal.

<sup>5</sup> A traditional long, loose-fitting outer robe with full sleeves worn, particularly, in northern and western Africa.

<sup>6</sup> Diouf, Magueye, and Cheikh Ahmed Tidiane Gadio (1999) "Repères: Qui est Sokhna Diarra Bousso?" *Touba: Bimensuel islamique d'informations générales, d'analyses et de réflexions*. (October): p.8. Cited in Roberts p. 156-157.

(*fiqh*) ... and then embarkation on the way of exalted Sufism (*tassawuf*).”<sup>7</sup>

Mame Diarra also prayed through the night, and “although she ate very little except at the feasts prescribed for all Muslims, she had no equal in her generous hospitality, offering food, drink, and clothing to any who needed it”<sup>8</sup>

Devotees insist that because of her esteemed qualities, God rewarded Sokhna Asta with the birth of Mame Diarra.<sup>9</sup> According to the Quran, “Allah will give them fully their rewards, and yet more out of His grace,” (4:172) And for such “vast rewards” there is no distinction between men and women.

“Lo! men who surrender unto God, and women who surrender ... and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth ... and men who guard their modesty and women who guard their modesty, and men who remember God much and women who remember: for them God hath prepared forgiveness and a vast reward.” (33:35)

### **Sacred Mother**

Mame Diarra Bousso had a love of divine knowledge. Murid<sup>10</sup> women view her as a sacred mother who is generous and loving. She is depicted as saintly – an ideal and devoted wife and patient mother. She rapidly and unconditionally gives away what the pilgrim asks for by using her mystical power. She

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<sup>7</sup> Bamba, Shaykh Ahmadou, (1989) “Mafatihul-jinan wa Maqaliqu-l niran” [Les Clefs du Paradis et les Verrous de L’Enfer or The Keys to Paradise and the Locks of Hell] in *Recueil de Poemes en Sciences Religieuses de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba*, (trans. Serigne Same Mbaye) Verse #16, volume 2. Casablanca, Morocco: Dar El Kitab.

<sup>8</sup> Diouf, *op.cit.* p.7-8. Cited in Roberts p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The Arabic word *murīd* (literally “one who desires”) is a term used generally in Sufism to designate a disciple of a spiritual guide. Here it refers specifically to a member of the Muridiyyah spiritual order.

generously gives out her care and love without any conditions or limitations for the receiver. The metaphor used by the storytellers for her generosity is “the ocean.” She gives what you ask for, endlessly.

It is said that soliciting her assistance<sup>11</sup> is particularly successful when enacted at her tomb in Porokhane. Her son, Shaykh Amadou Bamba who is buried in Touba, also gives what the pilgrim asks for, but there are, some women insist, limitations in his gifts. According to Murid tradition, the Murid founder once said:

“If you give me a sum, you will get back ten times as much. But Mame Diarra does not designate any limit!”<sup>12</sup> Some women think that Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba may be slower in fulfilling the supplicant's wishes and pleas. Others emphasize that mother and son are one, and both will assist a person in need. In any case, Mame Diarra is especially loved for her generosity, kindness and patience.

Similar to what can be found in other legends and stories about motherhood in West Africa, Mame Diarra is said to have lived a morally stainless life. The reward for her sufferings is the giving of life to a saint such as Shaykh Amadou Bamba. According to Muridism and in Senegalese society, the mother's moral quality is closely related to the child's behavior and

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<sup>11</sup> *Tawassul* or intercession is too broad a topic to delve into here. Though there is much discussion and some dispute on the topic of *tawassul* or intercession and some relate it to *shirk* (setting up partners with God), there are also Islamic scholars who have considered seeking intercession through the Prophet or through a living or dead saint permissible. Examples from hadiths are: Tirmidhi's hadith of the “blind man” and Tabarani's hadith of the “man in need” to whom Uthman ibn Hunayf related the story of the blind man, teaching him *tawassul* that the Prophet (pbuh) had taught the blind man.

<sup>12</sup> Akyeampong, Emmanuel K. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Editors-in-Chief, *Dictionary of African Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 74.

possibilities in life. She helped create her child's success by her patience, generosity and submission to God.

Mame Diarra Bouso was Ahmadou Bamba's and her other children's first spiritual teacher. While still a child, Bamba listens to chronicles of saints recounted by his mother. He hears the spiritual chants and narrative songs in the familiar West African cadence and rhythms. In her nurturing of him, she receives much credit for her son's election to sainthood.<sup>13</sup>

The mother is a highly symbolic figure in Senegalese society with its remnants of patriarchy, and according to Islamic traditions.<sup>14</sup> "Admiration for pious, learned and God-fearing women is a familiar component throughout the entire history of Islam."<sup>15</sup>

Mame Diarra Bouso is a model for Murid women, and revered as a saint in her own right today. There are fantastic legends of miracles built around her, though less is known about Mame Diarra Bouso as a historical figure.

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<sup>13</sup> Babou, Cheikh Anta (2007) *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853-1913*, Athens: Ohio Univ. Press. p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Most notably: "Heaven lies at the feet of mothers" hadith. And "A man came to the Prophet and said, 'O Messenger of God! Who among the people is the most worthy of my good companionship?' The Prophet said: 'Your mother.' The man said, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: 'Then your mother.' The man further asked, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: 'Then your mother.' The man asked again, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: 'Then your father.'" (Bukhari, Muslim).

<sup>15</sup> Schimmel, Annemarie (1999) *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*. New York: Continuum. p. 15)

## Story of the Well in Porokhane



The well at Porokhane

It is recounted that when her son was just a baby and still being carried on his mother's back, his mother, and her co-wife,<sup>16</sup> Fatima, helped each other draw water from a well. All of a sudden, the cord holding the water bucket fell loose seventy-five feet. The women became sad since they had wanted to collect the well water for their husband and themselves to be able to make ablutions. Fatima wondered what they were going to do, and the baby, Ahmadou Bamba, replied, "I can help you provided you keep this a secret." Ahmadou Bamba then asked his mother to put him on the ground. Apparently, he then put his little hand in the well, or went in himself, pulled out the cord, and handed it to them. This well in Porokhane is visited as a site

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<sup>16</sup> Polygyny has existed all over Africa as an aspect of culture and/or religion amongst Christians, animists and Muslims. Plural marriages have been more common than not in the history of Africa. Many African societies saw children as a form of wealth, thus the more children a family had the more powerful it was. Polygyny has recently started to decline.

of this miracle during pilgrimages to Mame Diarra Bousso's nearby tomb.<sup>17</sup>

### **Her agency to protect her son after death**

After some years in Mbacké Baol – the family leaves for Saloum, in which lies the town of Porokhane. During the long and tiresome walk to Porokhane, Mame Diaarra falls ill. The family starts their journey back again to Mbacké, but Mame Diarra never rejoins her husband because of her illness. She passes away at around thirty three years of age in 1865 when Bamba was approximately thirteen years old.

According to oral traditions, long after her death, when Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba was persecuted by the French, his mother mediated for him. In yet another story of a well, it is Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's mother, this time, who comes to the rescue. Serigne Abdou Ahad Mbacké (third Caliph of the Muridiyyah) recounts that Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba was put into a deep well by the French colonizers, and two angels came to him to drag him out. Bamba asked them if they had come by God's order. They answered, "No." The Shaykh turned down their offer. At this moment, someone grabbed him by his shoulders and freed him from the abyss, telling him, "Go and carry on your Mission!" On turning around, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba realized that person was his mother – who had passed away decades before.<sup>18</sup>

Senegalese believe that the spirit can have agency, though it is not clear from his writings whether his mother ever came to

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<sup>17</sup> The Porokhane Well Story is widely told - though doubtful it could have happened in this location due to the dates. Bamba could not have been a baby while the family was in Porokhane. He would have been a pre-teen. His mom died in Porokhane not on the way to Porokhane. The event could have occurred in Khuru Mbacké. And the story may be placed there. Porokhane was founded by Fulbe folks. Now Porokhane is associated with the Mbacké family.

<sup>18</sup> Seye, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba (2011) "Mame Diarra Bousso or Female Sainthood." <http://www.majalis.org/news/pdf/491.pdf>

his rescue in this manner. He wrote a poem after her death soliciting God to protect her forever and to quench her thirst in the heavenly fountain of *Kawthar*, mentioned in the Qur'an.<sup>19</sup>

Forgive us, forgive my mother. Hide our vices.  
Be kind to us and to her. O Allah!  
Do not punish us; do not punish her for her sins.  
She has no one but You. O Allah!  
In the tomb and on the Day of Judgment;  
Be our shield. Save us from distress. O Allah!  
Do not put my mother through a hardship she cannot  
endure; Do not break my hope. O Allah!  
Allow her to drink in the fount of abundance  
(*Kawthar*) that you have created for the Elected  
(Muhammad)! O Allah!<sup>20</sup>

### **Twin Pilgrimage for Mother and Son**

For Murids she is “the epitome of female sainthood” and “undoubtedly a perfect role model for women.” It is said that she was the only woman in history to have these things at the same time: her own town (Porokhane), a large mosque, an outstanding mausoleum, an annual “*Magal*” – religious celebration (attended by about one to two million people annually), a religious and devotional complex, which opened in 2005, where hundreds of girls – many named after her – are given, religious, social and professional free training.”<sup>21</sup>

The second largest Murid pilgrimage or *magal* in Senegal, after Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's, is celebrated in Mame Diarra Bousso's memory. She is often referred to as, “Boroum Porokhane” (owner of Porokhane). The event takes place in Porokhane, where she lived, and died, and her tomb is to be found. The event is consequently called the *magal* of Porokhane.

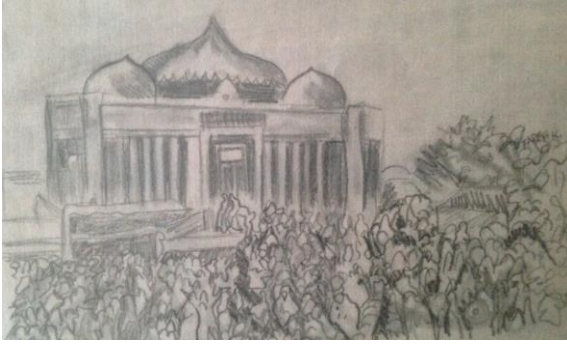
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<sup>19</sup> *Kawthar* refers to the river in paradise and is the title of the one hundred and eighth chapter of the Qur'an.

<sup>20</sup> These verses are from the poem “Sindidi” by Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba.

<sup>21</sup> Seye, *op.cit.*





Pilgrims to Mosque of Porokhane and tomb of Mame Diarra

The town of Porokhane is now a major pilgrimage center. No such pilgrimage is made to Bamba's father's burial site. Her tomb is the object of a following of men and women (but mostly women) whose devotion culminates each year in the only pilgrimage dedicated to a female Muslim saint in Senegal.<sup>22</sup>

The meaning of her life depends as much on the perception of her as being the mother of a patron saint of the country as on objective historic reality. No contradiction is seen between the popular mythology and the limited available historical details of her life. Her story is seen to express different *levels* of seen and unseen reality around her religiosity, and sacrifice, along with the spiritual greatness of her son who contributed to the revival of religious tradition and the pride of a nation.<sup>23</sup>

Today there is a cult following around Ahmadou Bamba's Mother who is also honored in an almost Marian way as a model of and for Murid women. Her birth name was Mariama. "An analogy is sometimes drawn between Mame Diarra and the Virgin Mary ... her piety is considered analogous to Mary's, and her life was as tragically short as that of Christ ... Muslim reverence for the mother of Jesus (Isa)" for whom an entire chapter of the Quran (19) is named, and "the fact that Ahmadou

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<sup>22</sup> Babou, *op. cit.* p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, Eric (2006) *Sufi City: Urban Design and Archetypes in Touba* Rochester: University of Rochester Press. p. 7

Bamba wrote Fouzti,” an ode dedicated to Mary, Mother of Jesus, reinforces this notion.<sup>24</sup>

May the Lord grant that this poem  
be an occasion of eternal happiness  
for the two illustrious ones,  
Isa [Jesus] and Mariama [Mary],  
Amin! ...  
Congratulations to you, Mary,  
For your superabundance of good works,  
the patron saint of women,  
chaste and charitable.  
Thou art above all the Elected of the  
Sublime and Unfathomable Lord...  
Happiness to whosoever places  
their trust in you ...  
It is obvious to all believers that you are the  
preferred of the humble, obedient ones,  
Thee, the mother of the best  
of the generous [Jesus]...<sup>25</sup>

Women related to Mame Diarra and Ahmadu Bamba possess and convey *barakah* and have ardent followers of men and women. The youngest and last-surviving grand-daughter of the Mame Diarra, the beloved Sokhna Maimouna Mbacké, “received a constant flow of people seeking her blessing.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Roberts, Allen F. and Mary Nooter Roberts, (2003) *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History. p. 158-159.

<sup>25</sup> For a video recording of this ode to Mary entitled “Fouzti”:  
<https://www.facebook.com/126603320738035/videos/230681683651422/>

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, *op.cit.* p. 159.



Sokhna Maimouna Mbacké

Her tomb is now prominently positioned next to the Great Mosque of Touba where Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba is buried. Mame Diarra's great granddaughters "are also revered and hold considerable influence in religious politics and economic activity."<sup>27</sup> Murid women often hold prominent positions in "dahiras," religious social organizations. They direct these by which "an incisive and indefatigable feminine dynamism blossoms."<sup>28</sup> Women are also enthusiastic participants in the Grand *Magal* of Mame Diarra Bousso's son. They joyously participate in the energetic chanting during this festival.

Mame Diarra Bousso's image is depicted in many murals, public and private milieus. Her portrait is frequently painted in street murals, on businesses, and displayed in homes. She is gaining in popularity among Murid believers globally. The cult of Mame Diarra Bousso and the pilgrimage to her tomb in Porokhane are growing. Twice each year, on a date decided by the Bousso family, many thousands of Senegalese women visit the shrine for a two-day pilgrimage.

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<sup>27</sup> Roberts, *Ibid.* p. 159.

<sup>28</sup> Piga, Adriana (2002) *Dakar et les ordres soufis: Processus socioculturels et développemenet urban au Sénégal contemporain*. Paris: L'Harmattan. p. 241. Cited in Roberts. p. 159.



Mosque of Porokhane

Women go to Porokhane to solicit Mame Diarra for help in cases of infertility, matrimonial difficulties, economic problems and so on. Other places that form part of the *ziarah*, (the visit to the holy places of a pilgrimage center) are the famous well, where Mame Diarra used to fetch water, the place where she pounded her mill, where she collected her wood for cooking, and where Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba used to crawl around in the sand as a small child. Besides the tomb of Mame Diarra the mosque is visited for prayers during the pilgrims' stay.

Gender differences and hierarchies are more or less absent during the *magal*. The visiting of the well and the forest, as well as the imitations of the daily household tasks of Mame Diarra Bousso to get access to her sacred power, add to the open atmosphere of the pilgrimage site. It is hard to find a man pounding millet just like a woman anywhere else, but in Porokhane men do it, in remembrance and in veneration of the the great mother of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba. Women's happiness "to be with Mame Diarra" ... is contagious, and men seem to react in a similar way.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Akyeampong, *op.cit.* p. 75.

For Senegalese women, travel expenses for the pilgrimage to Porokhane and the donation to the *marabout*<sup>30</sup> can be economic burdens or obstacles, which they try to overcome as they are visiting the site of a holy person. The effort to go to Porokhane and perform the *ziarah* among thousands in the hot weather and crowds brings with it access to Mame Diarra's mystical powers of healing and aid. For the Murids' long history of migration, "Travel has been richly symbolic as a means of obtaining knowledge of this world, the inner self, and ultimately the divine."<sup>31</sup> Women show they are willing to make a physical effort, and maintain the will to go to Porokhane. Once there, they receive *barakah* or blessing from the *marabout* they go to see. Additionally, there is great spiritual merit directly from God – without the intermediation of the *marabout* – solely for their sacred efforts.

Many who go to Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's tomb will not omit going to his mother's tomb. Murids nowadays not only go to Touba to celebrate the memory of Shaykh Amadou Bamba (during the *magal*<sup>32</sup> of Touba) but include the *magal* of Porokhane in their sacred geography. There is a growing following of Mame Diarra Bousso to the annual pilgrimage celebrations in Porokhane where her mausoleum is located. For many Murid women, Porokhane symbolizes Mame Diarra, the mother, and Touba symbolizes Shaykh Amadou Bamba, the son. People talk about the town of Touba and Serigne<sup>33</sup> Touba (Shaykh Amadou Bamba) as if they are the same. Women especially tend to perceive and speak of Mame Diarra and her

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<sup>30</sup> A *marabout* is an African holy man. Here *marabout* refers to the spiritual guide of the person visiting the area.

<sup>31</sup> Buggenhagen, Beth Anne (2001) "Prophets and Profits: Gendered and Generational Visions of Wealth and Value in Senegalese Murid Households." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31 (4), 378-379.

<sup>32</sup> The *Magal* is the great pilgrimage to Touba where Ahmadou Bamba is buried. It is commemorated each year on the anniversary of the day he was sent into exile in 1895.

<sup>33</sup> "Serigne" is an epithet or title denoting respect and mastery

son as if they are *one*, “because he, the son, was born by her, the mother.”<sup>34</sup>

In the eyes of Murid women and many Murid men, Porokhane is as important a pilgrimage place as Touba, where Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba is entombed. Men commonly sing beautiful odes to and about her. Women and men create their own cosmology, in which sacred space and body cross over. In a similar way one could say that both genders – male and female – mix or melt into a divine union in women's imaginary. The fact that they see Mame Diarra and Serigne Touba (Ahmadou Bamba) as *one* sacred person, could be interpreted as an authentic Sufi version of the divine love. Here, the female element achieves a transcendental significance through the image of motherhood.<sup>35</sup>

According to Islamic cosmology, a divine order of complementarity is reflected in the meaning of being male and female. In this view the archetype of Absoluteness and Majesty of God are manifested most directly in the masculine state, and Infinity and Beauty in the feminine state.<sup>36</sup> No wonder Mame Diarra is seen as giving “endlessly” and being like the “ocean.” Both she and her son are seen as one, reflecting complementary divine archetypes. Together they are seen as equally important for the pilgrimage to their respective resting places or “lieux de mémoire.”<sup>37</sup> For many followers their unitary presence is ever present and their memory alive.

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<sup>34</sup> Rosander, Eva Evers (2003). “Mame Diarra Bouso – the Murid Mother of Porokhane, Senegal.” *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*: Issue 4

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (1987) “The Male and the Female in the Islamic Perspective” in Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, ed. *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*. London: KPI, 47-58.

<sup>37</sup> Both pilgrimage sites are symbolic of the memorial heritage of the Murids. Touba, where Bamba is buried, abounds with symbolism in the design of the city. See Dieye, Cheikh Abdoulaye (1998) *Touba, Signs and Symbols*.

By contrast, a minority of people derive her religious status from the fact that she gave birth to the founder of Muridism, while not necessarily seeing her as an outstanding sacred religious personality in her own right, apart from her maternal relation to the founder. The devout Murids who go to the *magal* in Porokhane, however, see her as a sacred personality of the same high spiritual status as her son.<sup>38</sup>

Born out of great devotion, visual and narrative hagiographies of Mame Diarra Bousso and Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba are ongoing.<sup>39</sup> The love, spirituality and adoration shown equally to both by their followers – emanating out of their love of God – is remarkable in their life stories and the continuation of their legacy.

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<sup>38</sup> In visiting the pilgrimage sites, the author personally witnessed that the mother and son were indeed revered equally.

<sup>39</sup> Roberts, *op. cit.* p. 38.