Islamic Fundamentalism Framing Politics in Mali: From the Middle Ages to the Age of Pandemic

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Abstract

This chapter aims to traverse the centuries-long path of the mutualistic relationship between political power and Islam represented by two fundamentalist tendencies clearly discernible in Mali until today, deeming that as fundamentalist is the call to return to an Arabised Islamic orthodoxy that cyclically reappears in the country as the reputed syncretism of the popular Islam that is considered characteristic of the area.

Under this assumption, revisiting certain milestones in this historical coalescence could foster the comprehension of current movements – personified by imams and preachers such as Muḥammad Dicko and Sheikh Madani Haïdara – now that the emergence of the Wahhabi trend has begun to compete again with the prevalent traditional Malian Islam in modulating the orientation of the government.

Keywords: Islamic Fundamentalism, Category Formation, Religion and Politics, Mali

1. Introduction

> "[…] On the opposite bank of the Nile is another great kingdom, stretching a distance of more than eight days' marching, the king of which has the title of Daw.[1] The inhabitants of this region use arrows when fighting. Beyond this country lies another called Malal, the king of which is known as al-musulmani. He is thus

1 Ancient Roman geographers such as Pliny thought that the river Niger was the western part of the Nile, as did Arab geographers later. The true course of the Niger was not established until the XIXth century by Westerners.

> called because his country became afflicted with drought one year following another; the inhabitants prayed for rain, sacrificing cattle till they had exterminated almost all of them, but the drought and the misery only increased. The king had as his guest a Muslim who used to read the Quran and was acquainted with the Sunna. To this man the king complained of the calamities that assailed him and his people. The man said: "O King, if you believed in God (who is exalted) and testified that He is One, and testified as to the prophetic mission of Muḥammad (God bless him and give him peace) and if you accepted all the religious laws of Islam, I would pray for your deliverance from your plight and that God's mercy would envelop all the people of your country and that your enemies and adversaries might envy you on that account." Thus, he continued to press the king until the latter accepted Islam and became a sincere Muslim. The man made him recite from the Quran some easy passages and taught him religious obligations and practices which no one may be excused from knowing. Then the Muslim made him wait till the eve of the following Friday when he ordered him to purify himself by a complete ablution and clothed him in a cotton garment which he had. The two of them came out towards a mound of earth, and there the Muslim stood praying while the king, standing at his right side, imitated him. Thus, they prayed for a part of the night, the Muslim reciting invocations and the king saying "Amen." The dawn had just started to break when God caused Abū ndant rain to descend upon them. So, the king ordered the idols to be broken and expelled the sorcerers from his country. He and his descendants after him as well as his nobles were sincerely attached to Islam, while the common people of his kingdom remained polytheists. Since then their rulers have been given the title of al-musulmani."[2]

In the XIth century, Cordovan Abū 'Ubayd al-Bakrī, one of the most notable historians and geographers in Muslim Spain, recorded this account of the conversion to Islam of an early Malinke king in his *Kitāb al-masālik wa'l-mamālik* (Book of Highways and of Kingdoms).[3] Al- Bakrī's long quotation serves as a starting point and reference for some of the fundamental axes that this chapter will address and that constitute the essential characteristics that are still noticeable in current Malian Islam. It involves establishing the seed of a Muslim millennium in Mali – the benchmark for the sequence to be developed until the present-day; provides a hint to one of the seminal and still present marks of Islam in the country: its attachment to political power; as well as the assertion and tolerance of common people's pre-Islamic traditional beliefs and customs.

2 Nehemiah Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins (Eds.) (1981). *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Cambridge, p. 83.

3 Malinke and also Maninka, Mandinka, Mandingo or Manding. Malinke will be used in this text unless direct quotations refer to them otherwise.

Three centuries later, in the XIVth, illustrious Moroccan scholar and explorer Ibn Baṭṭūṭa attested again the coalescence of power, Islam, and commoners' engrained and previous customs. He witnessed the celebration of the Muslim festivities of *ʿīd al-fiṭr* and *ʿīd al-aḍḥā* in Mali during the period of Mansa Sulayman (r. 1341-1360), calling attention to their peculiarities, when not lamenting their "vile practices".[4] The presence of the king before both Muslims and non-Muslims on occasion of these celebrations exalted his support to Islam while preachers reinforced the alliance between kingship and the new religion by exhorting people's loyalty to the ruler. Even when Islam was becoming the imperial cult, Muslim festivals had to encompass pre-Islamic traditional rituals as observed by commoners, not all of them converts – at this stage Islam was still a faith of ruling and trading families – but strengthening and upholding the legitimacy of the king.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa regarded the reciting of the poets, the nudity of young girls in public, or *dyāli* renditions as the "vile practices" previously referred to.[5] Having asked about all these practices, he quotes "I have been told that this was an old custom, which had been current among them before Islam, and they persisted in it."[6] And also noted that although chiefs and nobility appeared to be more islamised, they still cleaved to traditional set of mores.

A third Arab account on medieval Mali was issued by Ibn Khaldūn's famous work *Kitāb al-ʿibar*, in the late XIVth century, providing a precise list of Mali kings until his time and emphasising who of them had performed *hājj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.[7] Though brief, Ibn Khaldūn's summary of events in West Africa mentions that the oppressive Soso people were subdued by the Muslim people of Mali, acclaiming Mārī Jāṭa – King Sundiata Keïta, who will be referred to in the next section – as a great leader.

Al-Bakrī's excerpt quoted at the beginning accounted not only the assumption of Islam as an official cult in what would be the germ of the Mali empire but, and very explicitly stated – "He and his descendants after him as well as his nobles were sincerely attached to Islam, while the common people of his kingdom remained polytheists"[8] – the inaugural moment of a characteristic phenomenon of religiosity

4 *ʿīd al-fiṭr* marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. *ʿīd al-aḍḥā* commemorates Abraham's (Ibrahim) sacrifice. Both are celebrated worldwide by Muslims,*ʿīd al-aḍḥā* the holiest one.

5 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *dyāli* (sing. *dyulā*), poets, refer to the later so-called *griots*, hereditary lineages of bards and historians in West Africa. They have preserved genealogies, oral traditions and historical accounts, while also composing laudatory songs.

6 Cited from Ibn Baṭṭūṭa: *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā'ib al-amṣār wa-ʿajā'ib al-asfār*.In Charles Defremery and Beniamino Sanguinetti (Eds.). Paris 1922, p. 414.

7 Cited from Ibn Khaldūn: *Kitāb Tārīkh al-Duwal al-Islāmiyya bil-Maghrib min Kitāb al-ʿibar*. In William De Slane (Ed.). Paris 1847, pp. 264-268.

8 Levtzion and Hopkins, 1981, p. 83.

in the area: the distinction between the imported and the purely local beliefs of the country. The fact that with the passing of the centuries they have amalgamated to a certain extent, alternating between periods of peaceful cohabitation and others of open confrontation, has not concealed a basic distinction between what is foreign and what is indigenous, what is revolutionary – in the sense of bringing a major change – and what is traditional.

Both tendencies have vindicated their differences and the validity of their essential values, although both could be categorised, in my opinion, into a broad conception of religious fundamentalism if we attend to the various definitions of fundamentalism. Because the meaning of fundamental is an essential notion here, and also pivotal in the orientation of this article, it must be taken in four of its senses: 'primary', thus serving as an original or generating source; 'radical', relating to essential structure; 'deep-rooted', belonging to innate or ingrained characteristics; and, finally, adhering to fundamentalism, that is, the strict and literal cleaving to a set of basic principles.

Following these senses, as fundamentalist is the call to Arabised Islamic orthodoxy that cyclically reappears in Mali as the assumed syncretism of the popular Islam – the *Islam Noir* that was so dear to and coined by French colonialism, which affiliated to Sufi orders and pre-Islamic beliefs and rituals – that is considered characteristic of the area.[9] One is a textual and Arabic fundamentalism while the other is an oral and vernacular fundamentalism, but both remain attached to what is settled as original and essential in their respective realms. One has been associated, historically as at present, to educated and Arabised minority elites; the other to the less favoured majority of common people. One continues to denounce today the same "vile practices" that had already scandalized Ibn Baṭṭūṭa; the other highlights the "ill intentions" of those who cross the bounds of the purely religious to reach out to social, political and economic control.

Al-Bakrī's, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's, and Ibn Khaldūn's medieval accounts already disclosed stalwart survivance of traditional beliefs and customs beneath the layers of Islam whilst presenting the origins of the mutualistic relationship that political power and religious authority have held until today in Mali. Therefore, revisiting certain milestones in this historical path seems adequate and useful to present examples of interaction – alternating periods of fluency/adherence and tension/defiance – between Malian empires and political entities, and the manifold manifestations

9 A purportedly corrupt form of Islam as a result of blending traditional African beliefs with the "real Islam" from North Africa and the Middle East, and a much-contested notion among scholars within the area. Cf. Vincent Monteil (1964). *L'Islam Noir.* Paris. ; Amadou Bâ (1972). *Aspects De La Civilisation Africaine (Personne, Culture, Religion)*. Paris. ; Mafakha Touré (1990-1991). *Critique historique d'un concept : l'islam noir. Mémoire de maîtrise, Université Cheikh Anta Diop*. Dakar.

of Islam for centuries. Neglecting these factual precedents undeniably hampers the comprehension of current movements – represented by imams and preachers such as Muḥammad Dicko and Sheikh Madani Haïdara – when the emergence of the Wahhabi/Salafi tendencies began to compete again with the prevalent traditional Malian Islam in modulating the orientation of the government, as well as of society itself, in matters as relevant as the role of women, the jihadist threat or, very recently, the response to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Two visions of Islam and power in the Malian empires of the Middle Ages: Al-Hājj Salīm Suwārī and Abd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī, Mansa Mūsā and Askia al-Hājj Muhammad.

The late XIIth century witnessed the collapse of the formerly powerful Ghana Empire, fragmented into smaller and competing states, among which the Kaniaga kingdom of the Soso people led by Sumanguru Kanté was prominent. Malinke prince Sundiata Keïta confronted and defeated him in the Battle of Kirina (c. 1230/1235), in the Kulikoro region, after having reunited a sort of coalition of several other kingdoms. Date, battle, and Sundiata Keïta himself are altogether generally accepted as the origin of the Mali Empire, because this initial coalition evolved into a federation of Malinke clans (also including Soninke, Fula, and Songhai groups) under his sole rule. In 1236 the emerging empire was consolidated by enacting what is considered one of the first constitutions in history: the Manden Charter, or Kurukan Fuga after the toponym, near present-day Kangaba, where according to oral tradition of *griots* or *djelis* (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *dyulā* in Arabic) it was presented.

Preserved and transmitted by this oral tradition for centuries and by several Malinke peoples in the area, it was almost lost and forgotten until compilation efforts were made during a meeting of *griots* in Guinea in 1998. The Manden Charter – inscribed in 2009 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity kept by UNESCO – was finally fixed to include 44 articles divided into four sections: social organisation, goods, safeguard of nature, and final provisions.[10] Subsumed in the first section, article 3 is especially relevant for the subsequent development of politics in Mali until today and, therefore, for the purpose of

10 Cf. UNESCO (2009). *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The Manden Charter*.; cf. Clyde Ledbetter (2016). Human Rights Studies as a Sub-Field of Africology. In Molefi Asante and Clyde Ledbetter (Eds.). *Contemporary Critical Thought in Africology and Africana Studies*. Lanham, p. 141.; cf. Centre d'Études Linguistiques et Historiques par la Tradition Orale (CELHTO) (2008). *La Charte de Kurukan Fuga. Aux sources d'une pensée politique en Afrique*. Paris.

this essay: "The five clans of *marabouts* are our teachers and our educators in Islam. Everyone has to hold them in respect and consideration."[11]

The original *Manding mori kanda lolou* (literally, the five *marabouts* protectors of the Malinke) belonged to the Touré, Diané, Koma, Cissé, and Béréte clans[12] and inaugurated the close relationship between Muslim scholars and preachers – sanctioned by the constitutional foundation of the empire – and political power represented by the Keïta clan. Nominated by article 8 "as the reigning family upon the empire", the Keïtas always claimed descent of Bilali Bunama from Mecca and, according to Levitzon, they "may refer to Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ, the first companion of the Prophet and the first *mu'adhdhin* (the man who calls for the prayer) in Islam."[13] West African dynasties traditionally traced their ancestors back to Muslim hagiography and usually connected to white figures, while, in the case of the Keïtas, it was a black one, as to emphasise its differentiation and specificity among them. Though nominally Muslim, Sundiata and his immediate successors in the dynasty were supported by a non-Muslim population through his fulfilment of traditional pre-Islamic religious functions associated with rulers in the area. However, their Islamic attachment and knowledge was founded on the advice of the above-mentioned *marabouts* and, therefore, mediated and influenced by the localisms of the area as well as lacking direct contact with the fundamental sources. This situation would experience a significant milestone at the beginning of the XIVthcentury that resulted in the consolidation of the empire and its Islamic outlines, as well as placed it, both figuratively and literally, on the map of the world at the time. Mūsā I of Mali (r. *ca*. 1312-1332), known as Kankan Mūsā or Mansa Mūsā, set forth from Niani, the imperial capital, in 1324 on his two-years pilgrimage to Mecca, astonishing the world with his piety and riches and making the king and kingdom of Mali known from Arabia to Europe.

This fame was vividly sketched in 1375 when the Majorcan Jewish cartographer Abraham Cresques drew in his Catalan Atlas – considered the most detailed representation of the world as it was known at that time – the realms of the empire and

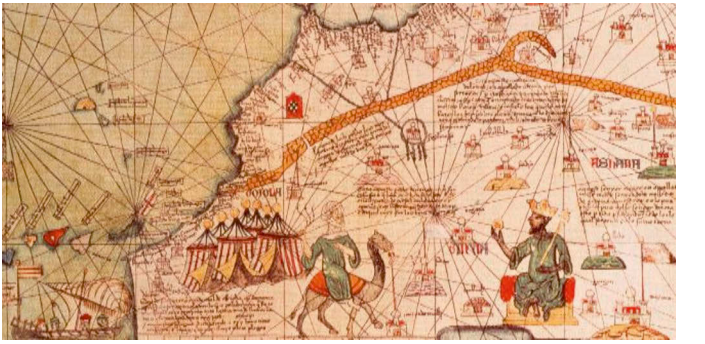
11 *Marabouts* are, still now, the holders of the knowledge of the Qur'an and are responsible for being educators and masters in the teaching of the new religion which was Islam. Often considered holy men and mystics, they were pivotal as preachers calling for the formation of Sufi fraternities in Northern and Western Africa, as will be seen later.

12 Following Robert Pageard (1961). Soundiata Keïta et la tradition orale : A propos du livre de Djibril Tamsir NIANE : Soundjata ou l'Epopée Mandingue, *Présence Africaine* 36, 63. They would be the clans maraboutiques Bérété, Ture, Fofana, Cissé-Haidara and Saganogo following Andreas Massing (2012). Imams of Gonja. The Kamaghate and the Transmission of Islam to the Volta Basin. *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 51, 57-101.

13 Nehemiah Levitzon (1980). *Ancient Ghana and Mali*. New York, p. 55. Also, cf. David Conrad (1985). Islam in the Oral Traditions of Mali: Bilali and Surakata. *Journal of African History* 26, 33-49.

its powerful ruler.[14] Cresques depicted Mansa Mūsā seated on a throne, holding an orb and a sceptre, and wearing a crown, all of them of gold. The king is outwardly black, a fact emphasised by the evident white Tuareg merchant he is receiving and also mentioned in the legend in Catalan above his left shoulder: "*Aquest senyor negre es appellat Musse Melly, senyor dels negres de Gineva. Aquest rey es lo pus riche e'l pus noble senyor de tota esta partida per l'abondancia de l'or, lo quai se recull en la suua terra*" (This black lord is called Musse Melly, lord of the blacks of Guinea. This king is the richest and most noble lord of all this region because of the Abū ndance of gold which is gathered in his land).

Image 1: *Abraham Cresques. Atlas de cartes marines*



Abraham Cresques (1375) Atlas de cartes marines, dit [Atlas Catalan]. The image inserted is the lower part of the fifth and sixth sections. URL: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55002481n.image

The return of Mansa Mūsā from Mecca and his contact with the original sources, resulted in a determined impulse in the Islamisation of the state as the ruler brought with him scholars, bureaucrats, and architects who defined the political and even aesthetic contours of the empire. Among them was the Granada poet and architect Abū Isḥāq al-Sāḥilī, who is credited with building the Djinguereber, or Great Mosque, and the Sankoré mosque, which made Timbuktu a centre for the teaching of Qur'anic exegesis or *tafsīr* together with other religious sciences.[15] However, Mansa Mūsā concentrated more in upraising scholarship and

14 Abraham Cresques (1375). *Atlas de cartes marines*, dit [Atlas Catalan], BnF. The image inserted is the lower part of the fifth and sixth sections. See: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55002481n.image

15 John Hunwick (1990). An Andalusian in Mali. A contribution to the biography of Abū Isḥāq al-Sāḥilī, c. 1290-1346. *Paideuma* 36, 59-66.

creating a bustling academic corps that could help the spread of Islam than in enforcing it for non-Muslims or obliterating syncretism.

This stance would conform with one of the oldest and most widespread trends of Islam in the Middle Ages in the area: the tolerant and respectful school of thought founded by al-Ḥājj Salīm Suwārī, a Muslim scholar and ideologue born in Massina, Mali.[16] Suwārī advocated that according to the purest principles of Islam unbelief was the fruit of ignorance and that, as a result of God's will, some would remain unaware of it longer than others. His quietist and peaceful elaboration refused proselytism and "represent a scrupulous disavowal of political and military coercion in religious matters and the repudiation of secular political office for professional cleric".[17] Furthermore, Suwārī's prescriptions exhorted Muslims to set an example to non-believers following a way of life according with the *Sunna* that would attract them to Islam.[18] His Mālikī school foundations also fostered trade between Muslims and non-Muslims and therefore supported the extensive social and commercial interfaith activity that the empire held in the area and that Mansa Mūsā epitomises.[19] But this religious and political approach concerning non-believers was soon to be defied and substituted by the first of many irruptions of orthodoxy in both realms, with the new trend represented by ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī and king Askia Muḥammad, after the collapse of the Mali empire following civil wars and the rise of the Songhay's in the 1460s.

Originating as a small kingdom on the eastern side of the curve of the river Niger c. 1000, it expanded significantly during Sunni ʿAlī's reign (c. 1464-1492) conquering principal Mali empire trading and cultural cities. In 1468 Muslim leaders of Timbuktu requested his assistance in forcing out the Tuaregs, who had seized it when Mali rulers' control weakened. He accomplished this enterprise, but only to immediately sack Timbuktu and annihilate many of its inhabitants, a fact that would validate his cruel reputation as stated by al-Saʿdi's account *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*: "[…] he was a tyrant, a miscreant, an aggressor, a despot (*mutasalliṭ*), and a butcher who killed so many human beings that only God Most High could count them. He tyrannized the scholars and holymen (sic), killing them, insulting them, and hu-

16 Dates of his lifespan have not been fixed and vary between late XIIIth and late XVth centuries.

17 Lamin Sanneh (1997). *The Crown and the Turban: Muslims and West African Pluralism*. New York, p. 37.

18 Ivor Wilks (2000). The Juula and the Expansion of Islam into the Forest. In Nehemiah Levitzon and Randall Pouwels (Eds.). *The History of Islam in Africa*. Oxford, p. 98.

19 On the concept of *darūrā* in Mālikī legal school regarding trade, cf. Armando Torres Fauaz (2006). Hacia el Dar al-Harb: Perspectiva legal-histórica de la emigración musulmana. In Zidane Zéraoui and Roberto Marín Guzmán (Eds.). *Árabes y Musulmanes en Europa. Historia y procesos migratorios*. San José, p. 193.

miliating them."[20] His detachment from religious questions and Muslim scholars or advisors was stressed centuries after as well by Triminghan:

> "Ali had no use for Islam, the religion of urban communities. Its learned men constituted a state within a state and were critical of rulers for lukewarmness in Islam and indulgence in pagan rites. Confident in his own power, 'Ali did not need their support and refused to compromise with a religion which involved paying allegiance to a law higher than himself."[21]

A resolute and directly connected response to Sunni 'Alī's policies concerning religious matters would appear shortly after with his successor Askia Muḥammad (r. ca. 1492-1529), who also embodied a reaction to what could be called the Suwārī-Mūsā's political and religious binomial even if not coetaneous. Askia Muḥammad became emperor of Songhay when he challenged the authority of 'Alī's son, Abū Bakr or Bakari, after having compelled him to embrace Islam, which he refused. A convinced Muslim, the new emperor was invested *khalīfa* (deputy) by the *sharīf* of Mecca, Ḥusnī Mawlāya al-'Abbas, during his pilgrimage between 1496 and 1498, as accounted by both *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh* and *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* (known together as the Timbuktu Chronicles and written in the XVIIth century).[22] Also, replacing Sunni 'Ali's lineage and legitimate ruling was considered in both accounts the result of confronting Askia's true Islam with the indulgent beliefs attributed to Sunni 'Ali, a notion recovered by Triaud's reference to the accession of Askia Muḥammad as "the triumph of the Muslim party".[23] Askia himself attributed pagan practices to Sunni 'Ali, linking them to his mother's origins, in his discussions with 'Abd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī, his fundamental and fundamentalist counsellor and the one responsible for many of his endeavours.[24]

Al-Maghīlī personifies the first attempt to redirect what he held as the degradation and defilement of pure Islam as a result of former tolerance and acquiescence to pre-Islamic local customs, consequently opposing both Suwārī's doctrine and precedent rulers' governance. He was neither a Malian, nor a black nor an indigenous language speaker, but a white Berber scholar and Arabic speaker from Tlemcen in present-day Algeria, and thus, an outlander in all senses. His radical and controversial views had already been considered undesirable in Tuat, a region in central Algeria where he called for the destruction of synagogues and exhorted

20 John Hunwick (2003). *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire. Al-Sa'di's Tārīkh al-sūdān down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*. Leiden, p. 91.

21 John Triminghan (1962). *A History of Islam in West Africa*. London, p. 94.

22 Cf. Omer El-Nagar (1969). *West Africa and the Muslim Pilgrimage: An Historical Study with Special Reference to the Nineteenth Century*. PhD Thesis, SOAS. London, p. 9.

23 Jean-Louis Triaud (1973). *Islam et sociétés soudanaises au Moyen Age*. Paris, p. 155.

24 John Hunwick (1985/1). Sharī'a in Songhay: the replies of al-Maghīlī to the questions of Askia al-Ḥājj Muḥammad. *Studia Islamica* 61, 163-171.

to the strict segregation of non-believers, causing a social discontent that forced him to leave, and in Fez, Morocco, where Islamic jurists made the sultan send him into exile.[25] Fleeing to the south, he finally arrived in the Songhay empire, where he found a haven and fertile ground for his doctrines in Askia's court, a comforting environment for the elaboration of his religious reformism around the idea of the *mujaddid* or renovator of Islam. Together with the emperor, he campaigned against syncretism, innovation and former practices associated with animism, introducing the innovative argument that waging *jihād* – a notion that has not been implemented before in Mali – against those labelled as unbelievers was not only legitimate but obligatory to Muslims. This lawful and corrective *jihād* was sustained in three basic differences with Sunni stances: "[…] al-Maghīlī's doctrine of takfir which declares fellow Muslims as 'unbelievers' on account of their deeds; his sanction of fighting and killing other Muslims as jihad; and his legitimization of jihad against Muslim rulers because of 'oppression'".[26]

The already cited work compiling his replies to the questions of Askia Muḥammad and his most influential treatise – *Tāj ad-dīn fīmā yajibu 'alā al-mulūk* (The Crown of Religion Concerning the Obligation of Kings) – exerted an essential influence not only on the political, military, and religious procedures at that time, but on all following "movements of Islamic renovation in the XIXth century."[27] Movements that constitute a second milestone on the historical path of this article and that, perhaps paradoxically if attending to the general attribution of quietism to their doctrine, were led by Sufis in all of West Africa.

3. The paradox of 'quietists in motion'? From the Dina of Massina and the Tukulor empire to the French colonisation

In the following centuries, the territorial and political homogeneity achieved by the Songhai empire would turn into the mosaic of diverse spheres – geographical, ethnic, and religious constructions intertwined or overlapped – that is still perceptible today. Different ethnic groups and diverse interpretations of Islam began to settle in well-defined areas with a smattering of denominations and names taking centre stage and whose influence would undoubtedly shape the future of the country. Tuaregs, Bambaras, Fulanis; *Qādiriyya* and *Tijāniyya* Sufi orders (*ṭarīqa*, pl. *ṭarīqāt-ṭuruq*); Seku Amadu and al-Ḥājj 'Umar Tal; Massina, Ségou, or Kaarta began

25 John Hunwick (1985/2). Al-Maghīlī and the Jews of Tuwāt. The Demise of a Community. *Studia Islamica* 61, 155-183.

26 John Azumah (2014). *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa. A Quest for Inter-religious Dialogue*. London, p. 123.

27 Habeeb Akande (2014). *Eclairer l'Obscurité. Les Noirs et Les Nord-Africains selon L'Islam*. London, p. 121.

to acquire specific profiles and to leave an indelible mark on the configuration of what would finally be Mali.

By the end of the XVI[th]century, a Moroccan army crossed the Sahara, defeated the Songhai empire, dismantled its hegemony, and exiled or executed Islamic scholars – who were perceived as a political threat – in Gao, Djenne, and Timbuktu, the latter becoming the capital of the new arrived Pashas.[28] In 1737, Moroccan Pashas were substituted by the Tuaregs, also coming from the north, who imposed their control on the curve of the river Niger and also made of Timbuktu the symbolic representation of their prevalence.

In the early XVII[th]century, two new powerful and native Bambara kingdoms emerged: one around Ségou, between the rivers Senegal and Niger; the other around Kaarta, in the middle of Niger. The Bambaras had been part of the Mali empire but, as they had firmly resisted Islam, dissociated from Mansa Mūsā searching for a safe haven for their traditional animist religion and named themselves Bannama (those who refused submission). Kaarta would fall in 1854 and Ségou in 1862, both conquered by the Tukulor empire of al-Ḥājj 'Umar Tal, committed to his *jihād* against unbelief, which he also decidedly conducted towards the Muslim Fulanis, thus providing the first African example of a state being dismantled by coreligionists sharing the same culture.[29]

The Fulanis, who had originally come from Futa Toro, in Senegal, to establish themselves at Massina, in the Mopti region, had also revolted against the Bambaras in 1818. Despite being a minority ethnic group, the Fulanis, under the leadership of Seku Amadu, expanded from south to north at the expense of the Bambaras – whose anti-Muslim warlords resisted the occupation for around forty years – founding the *Qādiriyya* oriented Dina of Massina before being obliterated by al-Ḥājj 'Umar Tal, the most prominent propagator of the *Tijāniyya* order in Mali, in 1862 as well.

The Dina of Massina-*Qādiriyya* and Tukulor empire-*Tijāniyya* binomials not only defined the XIX[th] century in Mali but clearly conformed some of the imprints that, together with Tuaregs, Bambaras, colonialism and the last arrival of Wahhabism, have been conditioning the events in the country for the last decades. Therefore, a brief recapitulation on these two movements and Islamic states could certainly be of help for a more accurate understanding of current dynamics.

Though Sufism – a quietist and mystical Islamic belief and practice with several stages of growth led by a spiritual guide, whose adherents usually group in fraternal orders or *ṭarīqāt* – had begun to spread in the area around the XV[th]century, "this

28 For Islamic scholars and Timbuktu through History, cf. Elias Saad (2010). *Social history of Timbuktu: the role of Muslim scholars and notables 1400-1900.* Cambridge.

29 For the sequence and impact of this process, cf. Nehemiah Levitzon (1994). *Islam in West Africa: Religion, Society and Politics to 1800.* London.

Sufism was only the fact of individuals, did not carry a brotherhood etiquette and did not unfold substantially."[30] During the following two centuries, several accounts written in Arabic referred to certain figures in the area as "saints" and "sages" using purely Sufi terms and attributes. A distinct example can be found in famous al-Sa'adi's *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* when, describing an imam in Timbuktu, he utilises words imbued with mysticism such as: *quṭb kāmil* (the perfect man that has reached the highest degree of the path), *'ārif* (the knower of God, who has been given Divine Knowledge), *mukāshafāt* (spiritual disclosures), or abdāl (the changed ones within Sufi hierarchy).[31] However, Triaud maintains that there is no reliable source confirming organised Sufi structures before the XVIIIthcentury in West Africa, as he also refuses the rampant simplification – so widely propagated – of an Islam Noir purportedly attached to these brotherhoods.[32]

The XIXth century witnessed the vigorous flourishing of Sufism in West Africa, but with a noteworthy characteristic that differentiated it from the slow spread of Islam itself in the area: although it was at first a minority and elite current, it soon reached all layers of society and contributed undeniably to the Islamisation of the area. This success has been explained by the convergence between Sufism and the ancestral religion in many of their features: the isolation for ritual activities, adherents funding these activities and people in need, a discernible guide or master and a hierarchy, the passing from one stage to the next, the ritual ceremonies including music and dance, etc. These confluences would have fascinated the Malian population, paving the way to a more natural assumption of Sufism, which did not discredit previous customs and rituals as regular Islam had done since its arrival.[33]

In the first decades of the XIXthcentury, Fulani Muslim leader Seku Amadu embraced the *Qādiriyya* principles that would have been introduced in Mali by Askia Muḥammad's counselor al-Maghīlī.[34] Seku's *ṭarīqa* is credited to be the first one established in Mali and was undoubtedly influenced by al-Maghīlī's extremist views concerning *jihād*, as well as, and very remarkably too, by his spiritual and political master Usmān Dan Fodio, highest *Qādiriyya* authority in neighbouring Nigeria and the artificer of the triumphant Sokoto Caliphate, the glorious example of an Islamic state to be emulated.[35] Seku Amadu's efforts towards the creation of his

30 Hamadou Boly (2013). *Le soufisme au Mali du XIXème siècle à nos jours : religion, politique et société.* Strasbourg, p. 36.

31 'Abd al-Raḥmān Al-Sa'adi' (1964). *Tārīkh al-Sūdān.* Paris, pp. 20-23.

32 Cf. Triaud, Jean-Louis (1996). L'Afrique occidentale et centrale. In Alexander Popovic and Gille Veinstein (Eds.). *Les voies d'Allah. Les ordres mystiques dans le monde musulman des origines à aujourd'hui.* Paris, p. 418.

33 Boly, 2013, pp. 41-43.

34 Cf. Alphonse Gouilly (1952). *L'Islam dans l'Afrique Occidentale Française.* Paris, p. 12.

35 Cf. Seyni Moumouni (2008). *Vie et œuvre du Cheik Uthmân Dan Fodio, 1754-1817 : de l'Islam au soufisme.* Paris.

own Islamic state were endorsed by Dan Fodio, even confirming the legitimacy of his holy war against disbelievers – other Fulani and Bambara chiefs he considered pagans. The Dina of Massina (in Fulbe, *dina* means 'religion', from the Arabic *dīn*: religion, custom and judgment), as he named his state, expanded from its original location in Massina to reach Djenné – where he destroyed the great mosque claiming it offended pure Islamic views – and Timbuktu in the north. Founded in 1818, with Hamdallahi as the new capital, this Fulani empire and theocratic state – where *Sharī'a* was enforced and applied severely – left an indelible mark on the social imaginary by establishing governmental institutions, nationalising the economy, and forcing the sedentarisation of the nomadic herders. A Great Council composed of forty *marabouts* was responsible for executive and legislative power, supervising all measures and procedures were in accordance with Islamic law. In addition to the administrative and legal support of the *marabouts*, Seku Amadu was also backed by the most prominent *'ulamā'* – the learned of Islam, those versed in the Muslim sciences – of the *Qādiriyya* order in the region. *Marabouts* and *'ulamā'* therefore became the two essential pillars that supported the legitimacy of his endeavour and that, at the same time and perhaps not unintentionally, connected it with the 'fundamental' currents rooted in the people.

As time passed, however, rigorism and intolerance towards non-Muslims ended up irritating even certain of this *'ulamā'*, who reminded Seku Amadu that tolerance and peace were the main features of Sufism in general and *Qādiriyya* in particular. Among these scholars, spiritual leader al-Bakkay for instance urged him to maintain good relations with non-Muslim Bambaras and stop addressing letters with rigorous measures and interpretations of the law.[36] In any case, religious rigorism and bigotry, mainly focused on fighting pagan Bambaras, should not obscure the Dina of Massina's undeniable merits during the Seku Amadu period: an utterly structured state with egalitarian connotations, social protection systems, and a robust economy. All these achievements were obliterated in 1862 when Tukulor military leader and *Tijāniyya* adept al-Ḥājj 'Umar Tal directed his *jihād* against Massina.[37]

'Umar Tal was initiated into the *Tijāniyya* in his native Futa Toro in Senegal and later travelled to Mecca, where he studied for three years and was appointed deputy of the order in the *Bilād al-Sudān* with the command of "sweeping the countries".[38] Despite his efforts when he returned to Senegal, he failed in seizing animist realms in his homeland, thereupon successfully transferring the attempts and adepts of his Tukulor empire towards the Bambara kingdoms of Kaarta and Ségou between 1852

36 Cf. Amadou Bâ and Jaques Daget (1995). *L'Empire peul du Macina (1818-1853)*. Paris, p. 277.

37 For this episode, cf. David Robinson (1985). *The Holy War of Umar Tall. The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. Oxford.

38 Bâ and Daget, 1995, p. 239.

and 1861. Until the conquering of 'pagan' Ségou, 'Umar Tal's movements seemed to be congruous with the notion of an alleged licit *jihād* against non-believers, but this lawfulness would undoubtedly be questioned by his following step: the destruction of the Dina of Massina, a Fulani Muslim state also impregnated by Sufism. Though the episode remains obscure, this fratricide and incomprehensible war has been given manifold explanations usually stressing personal rivalry and religious reasons. Personal rivalry is still today remembered in traditional accounts in Senegal and Mali, although very differently: while in his homeland his figure encompasses a lionhearted aura, Malians recall him as a sanguinary invader, covetous of the flourishing and independent Massina.[39] Religious reasons would link the different mystical allegiance, and Massina's resistance to adhere to *Tijāniyya*, with 'Umar Tal's justification "in looking down on them as well as even attacking Hamdallahi".[40]

The Tukulor empire was unquestionably characterised by theocracy and 'Umar Tal's conviction of being divinely guided in his primary mission: the complete Islamisation of the area, banishing all remaining traces of unorthodoxy as understood by the *Tijāniyya*. But a third and relevant cause has also been pointed out when accentuating the strictly political causes of this new example of 'quietism in motion'. Sanankoua remarks that it was 'Umar Tal's broad vision and consciousness – in opposition to the more secluded and encapsulated vision of the Dina of Massina – of the danger of French colonial progress from the coast that led his aim to build a vast and viable conglomerate suitable to resist European pressure.[41] He was certainly aware of this menace after having been compelled to sign a covenant with General Louis Faidherber, governor of French Senegal, recognising the river Senegal as the boundary between his empire and this French territory. 'Umar Tal's fears of French expansion were not unfounded and the Tukulor empire fell about thirty years after his death, as the colonial power viewed it as the main obstacle to its accession to the Niger valley.[42] Beginning in 1883 with a series of military campaigns that would lead to the capture of Bamako, Ségou was conquered in 1893 and Timbuktu in 1894. By the end of the century, French Sudan became part of French West Africa – Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF) – a federation of territories that also included present-day Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea, Benin, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso.

39 Cf. Olga Torres Díaz (2020). Islamism and Women in the Sahel: Roots and Evolutions. In Klaus Hock and Nina Käsehage (Eds.). *'Militant Islam' vs. 'Islamic Militancy'? Religion, Violence, Category Formation and Applied Research. Contested Fields in the Discourse of Scholarship*. Zürich, p. 202.

40 Patrick Ryan (2000). The Mystical Theology of Tijānī Sufism and Its Social Significance in West Africa. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 30, N° 2, 216.

41 Cf. Bintou Sanankoua (1990). *Un empire peul au XIX^e siècle : la Diina du Maasina*. Paris.

42 Cf. Yves Saint-Martin (1967). *L'Empire toucouleur et la France. Un demi-siècle de relations diplomatiques (1846-1893)*. Dakar.

French colonial irruption in the area implied not only a territorial invasion, but the encounter with an absolute otherness and the appearance of a new actor who would join pre-existing ones. And if colonial power always involved, in one way or another, the domination of a physical space, the appropriation of its resources, and the influence over the local people's mentality, in the case of France the concept of mission civilisatrice had to be added to all the rest.[43] This notion would connote the essence of French achievements, including secular republican values and the fervour for modernising and casting out the evils of ignorance and superstitions in the rural areas of metropolitan France as well as in its colonies. Secularism and the eradication of superstitions constituted two of the main features of France's impact in all of West Africa, challenging the popular understanding of both traditional political exercise and customary beliefs. Therefore, fearing a revivification of these traditional movements in the area, the French determinedly contended with concealing any missionary or armed initiative during their colonial dominion, and even more so with any intrusion of religion in the political realm.

Unquestionably, sixty-seven years of French colonial presence enacting secular republican values constituted a decisive turn in the restructuring of the hitherto intimate blending of political power and religious influence. Whether to adhere to or to challenge this change of events, local and previous actors could not avoid being impacted and taking a stance regarding the new reality. French law on the separation of church and state in 1905 immediately reached the African colonies, also introducing a new dichotomy to tack on the pre-existing ones: religious actors cooperating with colonial power – after the creation of the *Service des affaires musulmanes* – or rejecting any form of interference. The Muslim Affairs Service exerted close control over, for instance, issues concerning the fasting month of Ramadan or the organisation of the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca. However, managing this second question with the intention of gaining popularity among the Muslim community had an unexpected collateral effect in the years to come: together with a rapid spread of Islam among those who had traditionally not been Muslims, the strengthening of Wahhabi reformism – represented by the *ahl al-Sunna* movement – trends in response to Sufi 'whimsicalness'.[44]

43 Cf. Alice Conklin (1997). *A Mission to Civilize. The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*. Stanford.

44 For these questions, cf. Carsten Hock (1960). *Fliegen die Seelen der Heiligen: Muslimische Reform und staatliche Autorität in der Republik Mali seit 1960*. Berlin; cf. Julia Leininger (2013). *Religiöse Akteure in Demokratisierungsprozessen. Konstruktiv, destruktiv und obstruktiv*. Wiesbaden.

4. XXth – XXIst centuries. From Independence to the Age of Pandemic

Whereas Wahhabi ideas had been introduced in the country by the 1920s, it was after independence that their adherents began to compete with *marabouts* for closeness to the new post-colonial nationalist governments. Wahhabi's main focus was to reform education, to spread the teaching of Arabic, and, on the whole, to return to an orthopraxy of Islam strictly rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunna.

Concurrently, another phenomenon that had also begun under the colonial domination and that would become crucial in the future of the country finally bourgeoned: the popularisation of Muslim preachers' public sermons outside the mosques, addressing Muslims and non-Muslims, that "[…] became one of the principal means for facilitating the spread of Islam and for the standardization of Islamic practice, with implications for public piety in Mali."[45]

Modibo Keïta, first president of independent Mali, was also the first modern ruler to be compelled to juggle his Muslim origin with his secularist political convictions, as well as to deal with the emergent trends represented by both Wahhabis and Muslim preachers. Born at the beginning of the XXthcentury in by then French Sudan, he was the co-founder of the socialist inclined Sudanese Union (US) party in 1945, later merging with the anticolonial African Democratic Rally (RDA) to form the US-RDA. Under this coalition, he first had a seat in the territorial assembly in 1948 and later was a deputy in the French National Assembly from 1956 to 1958. Claiming Sudan's autonomy within the French Community and aiming to create a West African federation – that solely resulted in an ephemeral Mali Federation that he presided over, composed of Senegal and Sudan in 1959 – Keïta's party finally proclaimed the independent Republic of Mali in 1960.

Keïta's ruling was based on Marxist ideology, which, together with his French education in the principles of *laïcité*, resulted in an official discourse pushing Islam aside by stating that religion was a private issue and banning Islamic associations.[46] Many of these associations originated after the arrival of returnees from Saudi Arabia after graduating from their religious institutions and often took the form of Islamic nongovernmental organisations providing finance for schools and grants for different projects, as well as distributing Salafi oriented literature.[47]

As in many other countries in the area, post-colonial governments in Mali were characterised by instability and the periodic intrusion of the military seizing con-

45 Benjamin Soares (2004). Islam and public piety in Mali. In Armando Salvatore and Dale Eickelman (Eds.). *Public Islam and the common good*. Leiden, p. 210.

46 For Keïta's ideological discourse, cf. Francis Snyder (1967). The Political Thought of Modibo Keita. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 5, N° 1, 79-106.

47 Cf. John Hunwick (1997). Sub-Saharan Africa and the Wider World of Islam: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. In David Westerlund and Eva Evers Rosander (Eds.). *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists*. London, pp. 28-54.

trol after *coup d'états*. In Mali, the sequence included Keïta being deposed by Lt. Moussa Traoré in a military coup in 1968, also deposed by Col. Amadou Toumani Touré in 1991, followed by an interim rule to develop a democratic state, which finally led to a new constitution and the first democratic multiparty elections won by Alpha Oumar Konaré in 1992. Democratic elections, even when customarily surrounded in the country by recurrent accusations of fraud, also led Amadou Toumari Touré again to the presidency between 2002 and 2012, when his inability to deal with the Tuareg rebellion in the north catalysed Malian army discontent that resulted in a new *coup d'état*. After a transitional period, new presidential elections were won by Ibrakim Boubacar Keïta in 2013, still in office after having revalidated his mandate in 2018.[48]

Whether they were democratically elected or came to power after military interventions, all Malian presidents have had to face the difficult balance between restricting interference by religious actors and resorting to their incontestable popular support to strengthen their legitimacy. These religious actors presented a wide range of interpretations of Islam, but among them, the aforementioned Wahhabi-Salafi inspired *ahl al-Sunna* and traditional Muslim preachers and *marabouts* cannot be disregarded for the comprehension of present-day Mali intertwinement of politics and Islam.

Wahhabi *ahl al-Sunna* grew and expanded in the 1970s when president Traoré's tolerance towards Islamic organisations counterbalanced the determined marginalisation they had experienced under Keïta's administration. This tolerance had a relevant effect on education, developing Islamic madrasas and the teaching of Arabic, and public presence, opening new mosques as well as broadcasting religious programmes.[49] Together with the reedition of a new wave of fundamentalist reformism, another pertinent outcome has perhaps not been sufficiently pointed out: the Arabisation of certain intellectual and educated layers of the population to distinguish themselves from previous ill-influenced Frenchification as well as from lower classes. In any case, both prior Frenchification and later Arabisation share the common trait of establishing an edge between 'cultivated' elites and common people that has always been a historical characteristic in the area and is still tangible today. Furthermore, even though this Arabisation aspires to spread to other collectives and social classes – through the expansion of its religious schools – its elitist origin cannot be neglected, nor can the fact that it is associated with a certain disdain towards the popular customs of the non-Arabised.

48 The list would be completed by the interim presidency of Amadou Sanogo (21 days in 2012) and Dioncounda Traoré (17 months) during the transition between the last military coup and the presidential elections in 2013.

49 Between 1968 and 1983 the number of mosques rose from 77 to 203 in Bamako alone. Cf. Louis Brenner (2001). *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West Africa Muslim Society*. London, p. 197.

Malian reformers labelled as Wahhabis censure, for instance, the wide range of social roles carried out by *griots* connecting them with social castes and endogamous lineages as well as, in a very similar way Ibn Baṭṭūṭa had done in the XIV[th]century, consider their performances and rituals immoral.[50] These sorts of appreciations revitalise and actualise the polarisation and the conflict between traditional orthodox Islam and traditional Sufi or popular Islam that has been shaping politics in Mali from the Middle Ages until now.

Two trends that have conspicuous representatives in Mahmoud Dicko and Sheikh Madani Haïdara, whose different visions – regarding the status of women, the response to ethnic schism or terrorist threats, not to be exhaustive – have been playing a substantial role in contemporary Mali, even now in the Age of Pandemic. They are the central figures of this renewed competition which, since the 1990s, the two main tendencies vying for social and spiritual hegemony maintain not only in Mali but in most neighbouring countries. On the one hand, there are the defenders of a Wahhabi-inspired, neo-reformist literalistic Islam with elitist overtones and, on the other, those who claim to embody the popular Islam of the illiterate and the marginalised.

Ousmane Madani Haïdara, a central figure of Malian Islam, was born in 1955 in a village near Ségou, son to a father affiliated with the *Tijāniyya* Sufi order and reluctant to the irruption of Sunni reformism or Wahhabism. His profound Islamic convictions and Qur'anic education led him to devote his life to religious endeavours as a preacher and a *marabout*. Beginning in Côte d'Ivoire in the 1970s, in 1981 he returned to Mopti, in his homeland, where his preaching and activities, critical towards power and establishment, were prohibited by the authorities in 1983 for the first time. He reappeared in Bamako in 1984 and, for the following years, his preaching found a favourable environment in the weakening of the movements linked to *ahl al-Sunna*, which were beginning to be considered too radical and backward in different milieus. Though educated in the *Tijāniyya*, he "[…] developed an idiosyncratic approach to Islam in Mali, blending notions of reform, Sufi principles of organisation, and a doctrine of Malian cultural authenticity critical of Arabism' of Salafis."[51] His hybridism, his iconoclasm, and the crudeness of some of his expressions earned him a second ban in 1989 after having stated, for instance, that "prayer was not Islam" and with Wahhabis assembled around the Malian Association for the Unity and Progress of Islam (AMUPI) accusing him of *bid'a*, heretical innovation.[52] This sentence illustrated his stance against praying as a sort of super-

50 For the roles of *griots*, cf. Francesco Zappa (2009). Popularizing Islamic Knowledge through Oral Epic: A Malian Bard in a Media Age. *Die Welt des Islams* 49, N° 3/4, 391.

51 Rahmane Idrissa (2017). *The Politics of Islam in the Sahel: Between Persuasion and Violence*. London, p. 178.

52 AMUPI was founded in 1980 under the auspices of President Traoré. Reuniting Muslims under a unique religious association reproduced the single-party UDPM (Union Démocratique

ficial compliance with social standards, which he attributed to Wahhabi influence in the public sphere, as well as against "the notion of being "Muslim by birth" (*sil-amèden*). In his opinion, if prayer is one of the pillars of Islam and an obligation for every Muslim, it is not enough to exonerate one from living according to the Qur'ān and *shariah*."[53]

In the following years, clashes between his views and those of the Wahhabis only increased, stressing their different approaches to society and politics. Differences crystallised in 1991, when Haïdara founded the social Islamic movement Ansar Dine and the Wahhabis aimed at participating in the first democratic elections in the country as religious parties, which they were denied.[54] This date also marked a patent division between the secular populism represented by Haïdara – mainly backed by lower classes who felt themselves supported and endorsed after decades of official post-colonial carelessness – and the purported elitism of those involved in manifest political ambitions even when religiously originated.

Following this division, and at the other end of the fundamentalist spectrum in Mali, would be Mahmoud Dicko, whose education and evolution sharply contrast with those of Haïdara in a new reissue of historical religious dichotomies and personalities.

Mahmoud Dicko was also born in the mid-1950s near Timbuktu, to a family of notables, and was originally a teacher of Arabic until ideologically joining the aforementioned trend represented by the latecomer *'ulamā'*, educated in and inspired by Saudi Islamic institutions and responsible for what has been termed "the politicisation of purity."[55] Imam of the reformist mosque of Badalabougou in Bamako, he has always rejected to be labelled as a Wahhabi although this has always been his adscription according to the general perception in the country, which also clearly distinguishes him from Haïdara's positions.[56]

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du Peuple Malien), both of which were devoted to overseeing potential dissensions and conflicts.

53 Gilles Holder (2012). Chérif Ousmane Madani Haidara and the Islamic Movement Ansar Dine: A Popular Malian Reformism in Search of Autonomy. *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 206-207, N° 2, 394.

54 Haïdara's movement is by no means to be confused with the terrorist group operating in northern Mali Ansar Dine or Ansar al-Din, led by Iyad ag-Ghaly and whose first action took place in 2012. In March 2017, terrorist organisations Ansar Dine, Saharan branch of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Macina Liberation Front, and al-Murabitun merged in what resulted in Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin - now the official branch of al-Qaeda in Mali - under ag-Ghaly's leadership.

55 Cf. Terje Østebø (2015). African Salafism: Religious Purity and the Politicization of Purity. *Islamic Africa* 6, N° 1/2, 1-29.

56 Cf. Ahmed Chanfi (2015). *West African 'ulamā' and Salafism in Mecca and Medina: Jawāb al-Ifrīqī - The Response of the African*. Leiden, p. 193.

Paradoxically, their confronted views with respect to the rights of women or the attitude towards jihadist groups, for example, were both sheltered by the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM) – also founded by the government in 2002 – in order to oversee the increasing activities and impact of religious actors in Mali. Mahmoud Dicko presided over it between 2008-2019 while Haïdara was its vice-president until he himself became elected president in April 2019. From this position, Dicko firmly opposed a new family code, promoted by President Amadou Toumani Touré in 2009 which would have improved women's rights, claiming that it was against Islam and Malian traditions, a campaign that made him come to higher prominence. In 2012, his political profile was bolstered when he conducted direct negotiations with the jihadist groups that had taken control of large swathes of territory in the north of the country – in the wake of a previous nationalistic Tuareg rebellion in the area – , this time overtly undertaking the place of the government itself although presenting himself as an 'Islamic' mediator. Haïdara, who rejected any kind of leniency towards those who had challenged a legitimate government and destroyed Timbuktu's heritage, accused him of sharing many of their views. Dicko responded that these groups were also Malians and Muslims whose stances could not be marginalised and that "in order not to alienate the Islamists, he did not issue any public statement in condemnation of the mausoleums' destruction."[57]

In a last step in his incessant meddling in almost all domains of the country's life – and now openly challenging the government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (often referred to as IBK), who came to power thanks in part to his support in 2013 – Dicko has found in the confluence of three extraordinary factors a new battlefield for his fundamentalism.

5. Mahmoud Dicko's fundamentalism and the perfect storm in the Age of Pandemic

The confluent occurrence of parliamentary elections, Ramadan, and Covid-19 in the first half of 2020 – together with the permanent hazard of jihadist terrorism – has paved the way to an extraordinary opportunity for Mahmoud Dicko to establish a new milestone in the interaction of religious fundamentalism and politics in Mali. As has been the case since the days of the Mali empire in the Middle Ages, the threats of the Age of Pandemic have once again highlighted the politicisation of religious currents and their tendency to influence and modulate governmental action. Once again as well, political power has not been able to disregard the enor-

57 Rosa De Jorio (2016). *Cultural Heritage in Mali in the Neoliberal Era*. Chicago, p. 130.

mous capacity, whether it be overt or covert, they have to leverage people to their goals.

While explicitly non-Wahhabi and politically less involved leader Sheikh Madani Haïdara remains far more representative of majority Malian Islam and is critical of the alleged Arabism and politicisation of Wahhabism, his social influence is certainly being challenged by Mahmoud Dicko's growing and determined participation in the public arena in recent years. The examples of these interferences have been multiplying since his intervention in the aforementioned question of women's rights in 2009 or the conflict in the north of the country in 2012. In November 2015, answering a question after a jihadist terrorist attack that resulted in 20 victims at hotel Radisson Blu in Bamako, Dicko explained that the wrath of God was linked to the presence of homosexuals and bars in the country and that "We must learn the lessons from the attacks in Paris, like in Bamako, in Tunis or elsewhere in the world […] God is angry. Men have provoked God."[58] In 2018, his activism opposing a proposed sexual education textbook for adolescents – including a chapter on sexual orientation that Dicko considered promoting homosexuality – also made the government withdraw it.[59] Finally, shortly after leaving the presidency of HCIM – after all a device of the establishment where at least a certain degree of containment was expected – in September 2019 he launched the Coordination of Movements, Associations, and Sympathisers (CMAS), a much more suitable vehicle to display a political role without restraint.

But while the examples of his activities have been multiplying over the last decade, since March 2020 they have acquired unusual speed and have been occurring parallel to the following chronological sequence of events in the country.

At the beginning of that month, neighbouring countries such as Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso had already confirmed the presence of Covid-19 in their territories and its menacing expansion in view of their precarious health systems. Meanwhile, the Malian government remained astoundingly silent on the matter, raising all kinds of suspicions that linked this silence with the imminence of the first round of parliamentary elections, scheduled for March 29.

By midmonth, the government announced the closing of schools and public spaces as well as the prohibition of gatherings of more than 50 persons and also recommended the closure of mosques. Concurrently, Sheikh Madani Haïdara appealed to the necessity of collective prayer to invoke divine protection against the coronavirus and, in a very different approach, Mahmoud Dicko warned the Malian

58 Laure Broulard (2015). *Mali : l'imam Mahmoud Dicko voit dans le terrorisme «une punition divine» et crée la polémique.* December 2. See: https://www.jeuneafrique.com/283688/societe/mali-lim am-mahmoud-dicko-voit-terrorisme-punition-divine-cree-polemique/

59 Andrew Lebovich (2019). *Sacred Struggles: How Islam Shapes Politics in Mali.* November 1, p. 11. See: https://ecfr.eu/publication/secular_stagnation_malis_relationship_religion/

authorities that the elections of March 29 and April 19 could not be maintained while, at the same time, asking the imams to close the mosques to limit the spread of the virus in the country.

On March 25, the Malian government reported the first two confirmed cases, attributing them to nationals returned from France, and a nationwide curfew was finally decreed on March 26 as a necessary measure to combat the expansion of Covid-19. Significantly, however, the closure of places of worship was left to the discretion of religious authorities, a fact that resulted in almost all of them remaining open.

On March 25 as well, Mali's main opposition leader, Soumaïla Cisse, was taken hostage by suspected jihadists while campaigning in the restive Timbuktu region. The opposition then denounced the irregularity of holding elections in which one of the most prominent figures challenging the government was absent.

Turnout in the first round of the parliamentary election, on March 29, plummeted to 35.73 percent of the 7.6 million registered voters and was less than 13 percent in Bamako. Some of the results were later overturned by the country's constitutional court in a decision that was perceived to benefit Keïta's party. In the second round, on April 19, the national percentage fell even further, reaching only 23 percent. The government attributed these figures to the combination of the terrorist threat and Covid-19.[60]

Ramadan began on April 23 and ended on May 23. During the holy month, the mosques – especially that of imam Dicko – were crowded with worshipers despite an April 15 document issued by the World Health Organisation, titled "Balancing Ramadan Practices and Personal Safety", which stated that the cancellation of social and religious gatherings should be seriously considered. Such a decision, according to Dicko was all the more difficult to make when it was known that Malian mosques "do not only have a religious function, but also a social one" and that many indigent people live thanks to these places while benefiting from Muslim solidarity.[61]

On May 10, Prime Minister Boubou Cisse announced the lifting of the curfew in view of the limited success this measure had had in reducing population movements and gatherings – given its coincidence with Ramadan and the lack of support received from the religious authorities – and the obligation to wear masks.

By the end of May, Mahmoud Dicko amassed all these previous events – the concealment of data on the pandemic, the manipulation of the elections, the kid-

60 For turnouts in both rounds, cf. France24 (2020/1). *Mali election run off tarnished by intimidation and allegations of vote rigging*. April 20. See: https://www.france24.com/en/20200420-mali-election-runoff-tarnished-by-intimidation-and-allegations-of-vote-rigging

61 Paul Lorgerie (2020). Au Mali, les mosquées resteront ouvertes pendant le mois du ramadán. *Le Monde*. April 24. See : https ://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/04/24/au-mali-les-mosquees-resteront-ouvertes-pendant-le-mois-du-ramadan_6037711_3212.html

napping of the opposition leader by jihadist elements, the interference in religious matters, the intervention of the constitutional court, and even the recommendations of the World Health Organisation – together with the terrorist threat, poverty, and the lack of an encouraging horizon for the youth, in an indistinguishable and nuanced assemblage, which he considered an irrefutable proof of the government's corruption and inability to deal with the country's problems, and in which he found a fertile ground for a new and definitive step forward.

On Friday June 5, even with the threat of Covid-19 exacerbated, Mahmoud Dicko was able to gather more than 20,000 people in a demonstration calling for the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta.[62] The June 5 Movement-Rally of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP), so named after this first protest, brought together a heterogeneous coalition of politicians, anti-corruption activists, different figures from civil society, and religious organisations in a newly formed opposition alliance. Among its numerous elements, however, three main clusters should be outlined in this multifarious constellation: the Front for Safeguarding Democracy (FSD), composed by around thirty opposition parties and created after IBK's re-election in 2018; *Espoir Mali Koura* (EMK), Hope for a New Mali in English, a civil society movement led by filmmaker and former Minister of Culture Cheick Oumar Sissoko; and Mahmoud Dicko's CMAS. The fact that the most visible representative of an alliance that includes multifold political parties and civil movements is a rigorous imam, although not unexpected, is indeed revealing.

Only two weeks later, on Friday 19, a second mass demonstration took place with Dicko leading prayers during the rally and calling again for civil disobedience until President Keïta steps down. Since then, disturbances, rallies, expressions of discontent, and clashes with the security forces have increased, with violence rising to previously unknown levels in Bamako.

On July 10, after gathering at the mosque of imam Dicko, demonstrators attacked the parliament and plundered the national television station, while security forces targeted the headquarters of CMAS.[63] Unrest continued and at least 11 people died and nearly 150 were injured in a period of a week, forcing President Keïta to accept the mediation of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and even propose a new government of consensus. Dicko called on his followers to show restraint and calm but, at the same time, rejected any negotiations and declared that the struggle would continue until the president's resignation, which he

62 Cf. Tiemoko Diallo (2020). Malians rally against President Keita, demand his resignation. *Reuters*. July 5. See: https://de.reuters.com/article/mali-politics-protests-idAFL8N2DI4N T

63 Cf. Al Jazeera (2020). *Mali PM promises from open government mass protests.* July 11. See: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/mali-pm-promises-form-open-government-mass-protests-200711174204324.html

considered the only creditable solution to eradicate the endemic corruption that was bringing the country to its knees.[64,65]

Conclusions

Corruption, injustice, and deviation from the values and principles of Islam have historically been the recurring arguments used by fundamentalist religious reformism to endorse and legitimate its claims and actions. Therefore, Dicko using the word 'corruption' to summarise the state of the country may not be accidental, as he is just one of the latest exponents of a long tradition that has been manifesting itself in Mali for a millennium with the accommodations that each age and situation have required. His ideological discourse therefore aspires to be ingrained in a historical continuum abundant with noble antecedents that are now being revived and whose unquestionable purity of intentions cannot be contested.

Mahmoud Dicko's discourse and activities suggest being directed to cover the entire spectrum of whatever affiliations and sensibilities could be present in Mali and which have been reviewed in this chapter. Thus, depending on the circumstances and occasions, he seems to embody the traditional *marabout*, the Islamic *ʿālim*, the pro-government political activist, the Wahhabi reformer, or the insurgent. Also, his continuous assertion that he is not a politician does not conceal his volition to shape the country's political future by intervening in every possible realm according to his own inclinations.

This Wahhabi fundamentalism without weapons represented by Dicko may seem more tolerable in its outward manifestations for the Western observer, but it might also be associated with certain menaces that make it perhaps even more hazardous for the stability of the country in the long run than the jihadist one. This is so because in this fundamentalism two seemingly opposite forces, centrifugal and centripetal, are being manoeuvred simultaneously and manifestly as the area of its influence expands, leading to a more than convenient result: the proscription and virtual annihilation of any dissent or contention and the strengthening of its monolithic conception by the increase in the numbers of its followers.

The centrifugal force expels outward those who do not strictly and without fissures share the only interpretation of Islam that this fundamentalism considers legitimate and sanctioned by original purity. A thorough ideological, rather than

64 Cf. France24 (2020/2). *Mali protest leader calls for calm after demonstrations turn deadly*. July 12. See: https://www.france24.com/en/20200712-mali-protest-leader-calls-for-calm-after-demonstrations-turn-deadly

65 This article was closed before the end of July 2020. Therefore, not only the future but also the immediate evolution of events remains unknown at this turbulent moment.

just religious, purge of any deviation is thus put into practice based on the arrogation of the capacity to issue or deny a sort of righteousness certificate to any possible response to its hegemony. This meticulous purge commonly evolves towards an impoverishment of the country's social, political, and religious ecosystem, as well as to the monopolisation and standardisation of the public space.

The centripetal force, on the other hand, has an extraordinary capacity to attract all those unattended collectives and social layers – deeming themselves neglected or victims of some kind of discrimination by the government, be it ethnic, economic, social, or political – to the bosom of the movement. The promise that the justice, probity, egalitarianism, and brotherly spirit of purest Islam houses the solution to all these imbalances has an enormous convening power in times of despair, affliction, deprivation, or external threats. It already had it by the times of drought and the conversion of King *al-musulmani* to Islam, as in the account by al-Bakrī in the XIth century with which this historical quest began, and it still has it now, when Covid-19 and the rest of the concurrent menaces impel the population to embrace the orthodox refuge that Dicko offers.

Religious revival and an increasing presence of fundamentalist Islam in public spheres are frequently perceived in Mali as a modern utterance of this Wahhabi influence, whose leaders continuously criticise what they hold as the undesirable loss of moral values and Islamic virtues in the country, as well as a resurgence of the dichotomy between Arab Islam and Sufi-impregnated popular Islam.

But the infiltration of this Wahhabi fundamentalist doctrine that is taking place not only in Mali but in other countries of the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea shares, in my view, obvious similarities and parallelisms with the emergence of Islam itself in the area centuries ago. The penetration of Islam originated in the upper and educated classes before reaching most of the population; took place in an initially soft manner, without resorting to apparent pressure or explicit violence, cohabiting with other trends at a first moment for then gradually replacing previous beliefs and customs; and finally led to a thorough reconfiguration of the exercise of politics and the model of the state. Identifying all those same traits and stages in the Wahhabi infiltration of recent years does not seem to be especially difficult and might also lead to a new reconfiguration, definitively blurring nominal secularism in order to evolve towards a fundamentalist Islamic Republic of Mali.

Radicals, extremists, Salafis, Wahhabis, traditionalists, or any other religious denominations and labels often imposed from abroad – and admitting all sorts of combinations and hyphenations – would certainly feel more identified with and represented by such a new republic. They all hold themselves fundamentalists in the most honourable of its definitions and if they have to name themselves, they are simply Sunni Muslims: emanating from the original sources, attached to them, apprehensive about innovation or deviation based on political, narrowly nationalistic, or cultural reasons.

In this sense, this chapter has deliberately omitted to refer to the diverse terrorist groups that have been operating in Mali for decades now, because their actions and agenda, even when having a mighty impact on the politics of the country, could hardly be framed within Islamic fundamentalism in the way the notion has been used in this article.

The external tendency to hastily associate fundamentalism with groups often categorised under the extensive mark of jihadist has neglected, if not tortuously entangled, the other denotation of 'radical': of or relating to the origin, thus fundamental. The result of this inattentiveness is the evident hazard of confusing Islamic terrorist extremism and Wahhabi fundamentalism, considering them a unique or interchangeable notion and judging both of their adherents in the same way. But, on the other hand, establishing a precipitate differentiation between them, based on the unawareness of the true principles and goals of both currents and on a Manichean attribution of greater or lesser righteousness depending on their actions, is not a minor challenge. This is because these groups often trespass the boundaries between them and because the non-violent activities of Wahhabism are directed towards a project of longer scope and could be much more dangerous in the long term, even if these activities are not so outrageous nor promote international coalitions to counter them in the area.

That this enduring project has been identified and that its attainability concerns very specific social classes was subtly attested by a manifesto titled "Call for a Mali to Be Reconstructed". Published online on July 20 and signed by a group of intellectuals, senior executives, and business leaders, it endorsed the denunciation – initiated by popular protests – of the deep crisis that the country was facing. The text emphasised, in a certainly significant and illuminating detail that Dicko could have subscribed to, that these multiple demands had their origin in two inescapable and constant features: pervasive and impudent corruption and, closely connected to it, intolerable injustice.

However, almost as a colophon, and when praising the qualities that ought to distinguish a future leader, the emphasis was made on respect, very significantly also, respect for the secularism of the state, which "seems to us to be a precious asset, which has often preserved the unity of the Malian nation and must therefore be carefully safeguarded."[66] An asset that is now perceived as endangered, whose preciousness has been deemed necessary to highlight, whose safeguard is being questioned, and whose future appears to be surrounded by incertitude.

66 Cf. Maliweb (2020). *Appel pour un Mali à reconstruire : Quatre jours de l'Histoire du Mali*. July 20. See: https://www.maliweb.net/contributions/appel-pour-un-mali-a-reconstruire-quatre-jours-de-lhistoire-du-mali-2886466.html /

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