The formation of an ‘Islamic sphere’ in French Colonial West Africa

Robert Launay and Benjamin F. Soares

Abstract

One of the most unintended consequences of colonial rule in French West Africa was the Islamization of large parts of it. Islamic movements have often been interpreted in specifically political terms, as instances of ‘collaboration’ with or ‘resistance’ to colonial domination. They can better be understood in terms of the emergence of a qualitatively new ‘Islamic sphere’ conceptually separate from ‘particular’ affiliations such as ethnicity, kin group membership or slave origins, as well as from the colonial state. This paper considers two cases in detail: the Hamawiyya, a branch of the Tijani Sufi order whose leader was exiled by the French and which was brutally repressed in the 1940s; and the ‘Wahhabiyya’, an anti-Sufi movement which emerged after World War II.

Keywords: French West Africa; Islam; colonialism; Sufism; Hamallah; Wahhabiyya.

La conséquence indirecte de la mainmise europeenne sur l’Ouest africain a été la rupture de l’équilibre patiemment élaboré et maintenu entre Allah et les fétiches; rupture dont a bénéficié l’Islam.
[The indirect consequence of the European annexation of West Africa has been the disruption of the balance, patiently elaborated and maintained, between Allah and the fetishes, a disruption which has profited Islam.]
(Gouilly 1952: 247)

Whatever the aims of the colonial rulers of French West Africa, the Islamization of much of the colony was decidedly not among them. Nevertheless, as Gouilly

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and other colonial observers noted with a mixture of regret and alarm, this was precisely and paradoxically one of the principal outcomes of French rule. By the 1950s, the populations of Senegal and Soudan (now Mali) were overwhelmingly Muslim, which was hardly the case only a half century before. Only somewhat less spectacularly, Islam progressed steadily both in those territories – Mauritania and Niger – which were already predominantly Muslim and those – Guinea, Haute Volta (now Burkina Faso) and Côte d’Ivoire – where Muslims constituted a sizeable minority.

French colonial attempts, whether to understand or to cope with this process, were overwhelmingly political. It would be a gross oversimplification to state that the French were hostile to Islam. Their political attitude was fundamentally ambivalent.¹ The French were specifically concerned with distinguishing between individuals and ‘tendencies’ who were either friendly or hostile towards the French. To this end, the colonial intelligence services continually kept meticulous tabs on Muslim clerics, monitoring the number of their students, the books in their libraries, the ‘quality’ of their scholarship, their Sufi affiliations, not to mention their attitude towards the French and their possible ‘utility’.

This same political perspective was reproduced, albeit with values inverted, by anti-colonial African Muslim intellectuals in the 1950s (Coulon 1983: 121–6), and, more recently, by certain historians of colonial Africa. The temptation has been to draw analogies to the German occupation of France during World War II, and to identify various African Muslim clerics as either ‘collaborators’ or ‘resistance heroes’.² Paradoxically, nationalist historiography has in some cases mechanically adopted the colonial problematic, and often enough the opinions (if not the prejudices) of the most colonialist of the colonial observers, by sorting out the ‘friends’ from the ‘enemies’ of colonial rule.³

Drawing on Jurgen Habermas’ (1989) analysis of the emergence of a ‘bourgeois public sphere’, we propose an alternative perspective on the Islamization of French colonial Africa which is less narrowly political. Habermas argues that there developed in eighteenth-century Europe a sphere of ‘public opinion’ characterized by the (relatively) free circulation of information and ideas alongside and as a concomitant of the relatively free circulation of commodities; it was in this sphere that matters of ‘public’ (as opposed to ‘private’, especially domestic) concern were debated outside the direct control of the state (cf. Calhoun 1992). Obviously, it would be fruitless to search for a direct analogy in French colonial Africa. However, we would suggest that colonial rule did indeed lead to the emergence of what might be called an ‘Islamic sphere’. Its formation was linked to critical changes in the domain of political economy, and specifically on the (always relative) lifting of restrictions of the movements of persons and commodities. Such movement ultimately generated a ‘space’ conceptually separate (though obviously not entirely autonomous) from ‘particular’ affiliations – ethnicity, kin group membership, ‘caste’ or slave origins, etc. – but also from the colonial (and later the post-colonial) state. This new space, precisely because it was so critical, was hotly contested. At the centre of controversy was the very definition of the Islamic sphere itself, in
terms of its relationship to both the ‘particular’ realms and the realm of the
state (cf. Salvatore 1997).

At stake in these controversies was the legitimacy of religious authority over
the Muslim community at large. The issues involved included, for example, the
nature of religious authority and how it could be recognized. Frequently, the
central idiom for such controversy was ritual, most notably proper and improper
modes of prayer. Such issues stirred deep passions. Riots broke out, and people
were killed; individuals were harassed, persecuted and imprisoned by the
French. However, it is dangerous to assume that the symbolic dimensions of
these controversies served as a ‘cover’ for some, more fundamental, agenda,
whether political – supporting or contesting colonial rule – or for that matter as
expressions of some putatively ‘deeper’ understanding of religion. The centrality
of symbols in general and ritual in particular in the controversies contrasts
sharply with Habermas’ paradigm of ‘rational-critical debate’, which is hardly,
however, to suggest that these issues were in any fundamental sense ‘irrational’.

It is important to point out that the much debated distinction between ‘public’
and ‘private’ domains, so central to Habermas’ argument, is of very little rele-
vance to the understanding of the development of the ‘Islamic sphere’. Instead,
we prefer to stress the contrast between ‘general’ and ‘particular’ concerns.
However, unlike the distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’, that between
‘general’ and ‘particular’ is intrinsically relative. Thus, bourgeois ‘public opinion’
might lay claim to represent the whole of society, however tendentious and mis-
leading such a claim might be. On the other hand, despite the remarkable spread
of Islam during (and after) the colonial period, the ‘Islamic sphere’ could never
lay claim to representing French West Africa in its entirety, but at most those
territories (or, now, nations) where Muslims constituted a clear majority. Never-
theless, the ‘Islamic sphere’ constituted a palpable presence, even in colonies such
as Côte d’Ivoire where Muslims were distinctly in the minority.

Islam before the colonial period

At first sight, the contention that the ‘Islamic sphere’ was a colonial creation may
seem puzzling, if not flatly in error. Islam has a long history – more than a mil-
leennium – in West Africa. If the process of Islamization accelerated during the
colonial period, it had been well under way long before the arrival of the French.
In order to appreciate the transformative effect of the establishment of the col-
onial state, it is necessary to sketch out (very roughly!) features of Islam as it
existed in the region beforehand.

Islam first made its appearance in West Africa, as early as the eighth or ninth
century, as a religion of commerce. By that time, there had developed a flour-
ishing trans-Saharan trade in gold and salt, among other commodities, between
the West African empire of Ghana and the North African coast. The trade was
firmly in Muslim hands. Indeed, up to the colonial period, long-distance trade
throughout the Sahara, Sahel and savanna regions of West Africa was essentially
a Muslim monopoly. It was primarily in and around the forest zones, towards the coast, that long-distance trade passed out of Muslim hands.

In the thirteenth century, Islam became the religion of state in the empire of Mali, by then the dominant political and commercial power in West Africa. However, the Islamization en masse of the king and the entire political elite does not seem to have dramatically affected the bulk of the agricultural population, either in Mali or in successor states such as Songhay, whether or not the rulers of such states considered themselves Muslims.

The pattern which emerged, and which was to characterize much of West Africa, was one where religious practices corresponded quite closely to hereditary social and economic categories. Long-distance trade was squarely in the hands of a Muslim merchant diaspora. The common practice of Islam constituted the core of a fundamental sense of merchant identity, linking groups and individuals over a vast area in spite of differences in language and culture, facilitating the movement of persons and goods throughout the entire network. At the same time, in various local contexts south of the Sahara where merchant communities were established, Islam distinguished members of this merchant diaspora from most of their — non-Muslim — neighbours. It followed that merchants did not necessarily have any interest in converting their neighbours. On the contrary, Islam was, at least in some regions, the mark of a hereditary trade monopoly.

Alongside this network of merchants, there existed a parallel network of Muslim clerics. These two diasporas were tightly interdependent. Merchants relied on clerics to instruct their children in religious matters and, generally, to monitor standards of Islamic practice. In turn, pious gifts from merchants to clerics were a critical (though not the only) way in which clerical activities were subsidized. Indeed, the degree to which clerical and merchant identities were distinct varied throughout the networks. In some regions, clerical families refrained systematically from engaging in commerce; in others, individuals passed readily from a commercial to a clerical identity or vice versa. Even so, advanced Islamic learning tended to be a hereditary specialization, associated with specific families.

Members of the political/military elite, whether or not they were considered Muslims, also relied on the maintenance of close ties to merchants and clerics. They depended on merchants for weapons — horses and firearms — as well as for luxury goods. Merchants were also a crucial source of state revenues, not only in the form of various tolls and taxes but as an outlet for slaves captured in warfare. Merchants, in turn, relied on rulers to ensure them safe passage; moreover, political notables were major consumers for their wares. Clerics, too, readily provided services to local rulers, in the form of amulets and other charms, prayers, blessings, healing and whatever other supernatural means at their disposal to guarantee the prosperity of the polity, as well as its king or chief (Sanneh 1997). In turn, clerics depended on the patronage of chiefs and aristocrats as well as on that of merchants. In spite of such real interdependence, the
political/military elite was sharply distinct – conceptually if not always in practice – from merchants and clerics. Most obviously, they were not part of any supra-regional network. Of course, warfare and diplomacy were both conducted across regional and political boundaries, but these in no way entailed the development of any trans-regional identity comparable to those of merchant and cleric. On the contrary, ruling groups had, of necessity, local power bases which tended to find their expression in and draw their legitimacy from ritual participation in initiation societies, state cults, etc. Not infrequently, Muslim warriors and rulers did not, nor were they expected to, conform to standards of piety typical of merchants and clerics: regular prayer, fasting throughout Ramadan, abstaining from alcoholic beverages. In short, the religious practices of the political/military elite, Muslim or not, tended to stand out in contrast to those of the commercial and clerical groups.

Even the jihad movements which rocked West Africa in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries did not completely alter this religious framework. These movements challenged the legitimacy of rulers, whether or not they considered themselves Muslim, whose conduct did not conform to Sunni norms as exemplified by merchants and clerics. Where such jihads were successful, most notably (in what was to become French West Africa) in the case of al-Hajj Umar Tall (Robinson 1985; Roberts 1987), the rulers were replaced by clerics, though it is important to stress that many members of the clerical network were consistently hostile to the jihadist cause. Indeed, the net effect of al Hajj Umar’s jihad was to create a Muslim ruling class which remained ethnically distinct (as ‘Futanke’) from the Muslim merchants and clerics under their control. The jihad most certainly did not accomplish the thorough Islamization of the population under its control – if indeed this were ever one of its aims.

By and large, religious practices reflected membership in hereditary social categories. Whether or not one was a Muslim and, if so, how one observed (or did not observe) the strictures of the faith, depended grosso modo on whether one was born a ‘merchant’, a ‘cleric’, a ‘warrior’, an ‘agriculturalist’ or a member of a ‘casted’ occupation (e.g., blacksmiths, sculptors, leatherworkers, praise singers, brass casters). This is hardly to say that the system was inflexible. Both individuals and groups might convert or, for that matter, ‘backslide’. Such changes, however, tended to reflect the incorporation of those concerned into a different category as when, for example, a ‘merchant’ group might seize control of a kingdom or, conversely, a ‘warrior’ group take up long-distance trade. Under such circumstances, Islam, although it clearly transcended regional and political boundaries, was nevertheless inseparable from the expression of particular identities, especially in local contexts: e.g., ‘I trade, therefore I pray.’ It was precisely by disrupting the entire West African political economy and therefore – quite inadvertently – rendering certain of these hereditary identities irrelevant that the French colonial authorities carved out a space for an ‘Islamic sphere’ quite different from anything West Africa had ever seen before.
Islam in black and white

The French annexation of most of West Africa went hand-in-hand with an attempt to understand it. The political mastery of the territories required at least a minimal intellectual mastery of the unfamiliar complexities of its component societies. Quite simply, the French had to form some notions about just whom they were ruling in order to formulate means to rule them.

At its most general level, such understanding (or misunderstanding) entailed the elaboration of a general concept of ‘Africanness’ (‘Africanity’): what were ‘Africans’ really like, and consequently how should they be treated? Not surprisingly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a broad consensus among French colonizers about the pertinence of an evolutionary approach which characterized Africans as ‘primitive’, ‘backwards’, indeed ‘childlike’ compared to Europeans. Even so, there was room for considerable ambiguity. Was there a single path to evolution and, consequently, was the ultimate aim of colonization to turn Africans into replicas of Frenchmen? Or were different peoples endowed with different potentials, indeed gifts, such that the African mode of evolution ought to retain its specific Africanity? Such seemingly abstract issues had a very direct bearing on French attitudes towards Islam in West Africa. If there were only one evolutionary trajectory, and if Islam represented a higher form of ‘civilization’ (literally more évolué, more ‘evolved’) than ‘Black Africa’, an intermediate stage between Africa and France, then it followed that the Islamization of West Africa was all for the good, a necessary step in the correct evolutionary direction. On the other hand, if evolution represented the development of the specific ‘genius’ of each people, then Islam, rather than ‘evolving’ the African (generically invoked in the singular), would ‘denature’ him, leading him further from rather than closer to the true path.

In any case, beyond the knowledge of ‘Africans’ in general, colonial administrators needed a classificatory scheme in order to be able to distinguish between different types of Africans. The most pervasive scheme was the division of Africans into distinct races or ethnies.\(^8\) The very interchangeability of these two terms, the first apparently stressing the biological, the second the social domain, highlights fundamental ambiguities in the French colonial perceptions of the ‘nature’ of African peoples. This is not to say that ‘ethnic’ distinctions were created part and parcel by the French. Rather, they stressed certain pre-existing distinctions, ignored others, and created yet others virtually ab initio. Willy nilly, the colonial order created an entirely new system, whereby individuals and clans, villages and often chiefdoms might all be classed as belonging to one race or ethnie or another. In principle, each such group was relatively homogeneous, but also more or less distinct and distinguishable from other such groups. The logical product of such a scheme was a discourse attempting to delineate the physical, moral and intellectual characteristics of each ethnie (Grosz-Ngâté 1988; Launay 1998).

This new ethnic discourse was simultaneously radically generalizing and radically particularizing. It was generalizing in that it definitively subsumed a whole
host of particular identities and loyalties – to kin groups, political factions, chieftainships, etc. – under an ethnic umbrella treated as ‘primary’. As far as possible, the French attempted to replicate these categories and sub-divisions in their creation of administrative units, cercles and cantons. It is tempting invariably to attribute such administrative policies to cynical attempts to ‘divide and rule’. In effect, the French were creating an Africa, in administrative terms, in the very image of what they understood it to be already. In any case, the ethnie took on a reality in between the colonial (and post-colonial) state and the individual, the kin group, the village, the chieftainship, the kingdom. People became Bete, Senufo or Bambara in relationship to the state and its authorities, that is to say in a radically new sense, whether or not they had ever before identified themselves or been identified in these terms.

Of course, these new general identities were at the same time fiercely particular in that they were intrinsically defined in opposition one to the other. Colonial administrators were literally apt to think in terms such as: ‘What makes the Senufo different from the Baoule?’, first of all, very simply, as a way of making sense of their different experiences posted in different regions and, second, in order to make policy recommendations for the future administration of these regions. Ultimately, the mission of the colonial authorities was easily defined as developing the particular aptitudes, if not remedying the particular failings, of each ethnie; the result was, quite explicitly, a colonial ‘politique des races’ (Amselle 1990: 181–3). The aim of such policies was ‘to ensure the stability of our domination by opposing Islamism [sic] with the counter weight of organized fetishism’ (Breviè 1923: 256, cited in Gouilly 1954: 250–1).

Islam was clearly considered a potentially disruptive element within such an overall scheme. On one hand, it was apt to split an ethnie into ‘Muslims’ and ‘non-Muslims’. On the other, it transcended ethnic, colonial, even ‘racial’ boundaries, linking Muslim Africans to one another within French West Africa, but also to ‘Semitic’ in France’s North African possessions and, even further afield, to foreign powers, such as the Ottoman Empire.

The French colonial authorities were able to exorcise this Islamic menace, at least in part, by conjuring up a reassuring image of an Islam noir, a ‘Black Islam’ which stayed safely within the confines of ‘African’ particularities. According to such a perspective, Islam in Africa was tinged with heterodox elements – ‘magic’, for example. Such syncretism allegedly rendered Islam both more accessible and acceptable to the ‘African character’. The structural base of this ‘African Islam’ was the pervasiveness of ties of allegiance to ‘marabouts’, a term the French applied in a sub-Saharan context to virtually all Muslim clerics. These marabouts, in turn, were generally attached to one or another Sufi order – specifically to the Tijaniyya or the Qadiriyya – which, although they could hardly be labelled ‘African’ in principle, had local, and in important respects quasi-autonomous, African branches. According to the model, ‘African’ Sufism helped keep ‘African’ Islam within safely ‘African’ confines. What is more, such a system seemed eminently open to co-optation by the French colonial authority. If African Muslims were tied by bonds of personal loyalty to their ‘marabouts’,
and most particularly to Sufi shaykhs, then the authorities had in turn only to win the loyalty of the leaders in order to ensure themselves of their followers.

If it had been the initial reflex of the colonial authorities to attempt to bolster 'fetishism' as a rampart against the spread of Islam, they quickly rallied to the support of 'Black Islam' as a protection against more menacing, putatively 'white' varieties of Islam.11 This supposed Oriental menace was simultaneously doctrinal and political: doctrinal in that it opposed a 'rigid' orthodoxy to a 'flexible' heterodoxy more in keeping with the 'African character'; political in that it opposed a pan-Islamic vision which looked to Egypt and Arabia for leadership to a cadre of 'marabouts' loyal to France.

The French construct of 'l'Islam noir' was, needless to say, a serious misrepresentation. There is no reason to consider that Islam in Africa was either more or less 'orthodox' than elsewhere in the Muslim world (leaving aside the thorny question: who exactly is to decide what does or does not constitute orthodoxy, and how?). Nor did the French necessarily understand either the nature of the loyalty which African Muslims owed their 'marabouts' or the scope (and limits) of their leadership (see, for example, Launay 1996). Consequently, the French could not but perceive the emergence of an autonomous Islamic sphere as a threat. Seen in these terms, Islam in French West Africa was either directly under their control (because its leaders were loyal to France) or directly in opposition (because it looked for leadership outside both West Africa and France). We wish instead to suggest that the phenomena they viewed with such alacrity corresponded to the emergence of an Islamic sphere that eluded the control of (but not necessarily in opposition to) the colonial state.

The emergence of the Islamic sphere

It was the transformation of the entire political economy of French West Africa which ultimately permitted this emergence of an Islamic sphere. In important respects, the colonial regime fostered, if not required, the freer circulation of persons and commodities throughout the colony. The explicit aim, of course, was to stimulate the flow of raw materials – peanuts, palm oil, cotton, wild rubber, coffee, cocoa – to the metropole. However, the process affected goods produced and consumed internally, such as kola, cattle and dried fish. For example, the kola-producing zone in the coastal forests, long closed to direct access to Muslim traders from the savanna and Sahel, quickly became freely accessible. The result was to deprive frontier communities of long-established Muslim traders of their strategic control over the passage of goods between forest and savanna (Launay 1978). Traditional political/military elites were, of course, completely unable to control the flow of goods into and out of the territories they once ruled, depriving them of an important source of revenues in taxes and tolls (which the French, in turn, imposed for their own benefit). By the same token, commercial elites who had managed to secure competitive advantages by cultivating close ties to local rulers were more easily edged out. The abolition of slavery was perhaps the
most crushing blow to traditional Muslim elites – commercial, clerical or political; slaves had represented a major form of investment of wealth, and their agricultural labour had freed elites to pursue other occupations, whether trade, scholarship or warfare (see Roberts 1987: 174–207).

The colonial regime radically altered the economic map of West Africa. Former urban centres, such as Segu, Djenne, Sinsani, Kankan or Kong, lost their importance and in some instances became backwaters. New colonial towns emerged as hubs of wealth and power: Dakar, Bamako, the towns of southern Côte d’Ivoire. Such towns were important both as new centres of consumption and as points where raw materials produced in the countryside were regrouped for export to the metropole. By establishing through ‘pacification’ its monopoly on violence, the colonial government was able to guarantee safe travel over long distances. In so doing, it created both new trade routes – more directly between centres of production and consumption in West Africa – and new forms of trade – middlemen for the new export commodities, but also a growing trade in food towards the colonial towns.

These changes in political economy drastically affected those very elites – commercial, clerical and political/military – who were the principal bearers of Islam before the colonial period. Political/military groups were rendered totally obsolete as such, deprived both of sources of revenue and the possibility of independent resort to violence. The radical changes in trade routes made the location of the old commercial elites, strategically situated with reference to pre-colonial routes, a drawback rather than an asset. Their carefully managed ties to local rulers, another means by which they maintained monopolies, were no longer of any use. Clerical elites, their slaves liberated and many of their patrons impoverished, fared hardly better.

This depiction is in some respects exaggeratedly gloomy. If groups as such consistently lost their monopolies, individuals remained able to compete for resources within the new colonial economy. Plantations as well as the colonial towns became poles of attraction. Seasonal labourers flocked to the peanut plantations of Sine and Saloum in Senegal, and later to the coffee (and ultimately also cocoa) plantations of Côte d’Ivoire (as well as to the British colonies of Gambia and the Gold Coast). Particularly in Côte d’Ivoire, it was indeed possible for individuals who came originally as labourers to acquire land through purchase and become planters in their own right. The towns, in turn, offered opportunities for wage labour and, even more, for petty commerce. The most successful could enter trade on a larger scale, particularly in the long-distance sector or as middlemen. However, these same opportunities were open to individuals who were not formerly members of elite groups: agriculturalists and members of artisan ‘castes’. Indeed, those liberated slaves who moved away from their masters were sometimes actually at an advantage, to the extent that they had an early incentive to gravitate towards newly strategic locations.

This new commercial sector, centring on the new towns and plantations, was nonetheless largely if not entirely a Muslim monopoly. At first sight, this close association between Islam and commerce might seem to indicate a continuity
between the precolonial and the colonial political economies. But this very illusion of continuity masked fundamental, if not revolutionary changes. Entry into this Muslim commercial sector no longer hinged on collective hereditary identities. One might enter or attempt to enter as an individual. For those who were not already Muslim, conversion to Islam was a virtually obligatory concomitant to entry into this sector. However, such conversion engaged individuals as such, and no longer whole groups. Islam thus ceased to be a clear mark of ethnic or kin group identity. Eventually, the notion of a Bamana, Senoufo or Dogon Muslim ceased to be an outright oxymoron. Moreover, the conversion of individuals entailed neither their secession from their natal kin groups nor a change in the religious identity of the group as a whole; rather, such groups ceased — as wholes — to have a religious identity at all (Amselle 1990; cf. Soares 1997b).

Paradoxically, it is precisely because conversion to Islam became an individual phenomenon that Islam ceased to be associated (relatively speaking, at least) with particular identities. Conversion allowed entry into a global community, linking agricultural and urban wage labourers; hawkers, market traders, and wholesalers; conscripts to the army and to forced labour (abolished in francophone Africa only in 1946); and increasingly their village kinfolk. At the ideological core of this newly de-particularized Islamic sphere were a series of practices — fasting throughout Ramadan, the hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina) and, most notably, regular prayer — which united Muslims not only throughout West Africa but all over the world. Previously, such practices had characterized only hereditary commercial and clerical groups, as well as ruling groups of clerical origin in the jihadist states, in contradistinction to other groups, including Muslim ‘warriors’. Henceforth, Muslim ‘warriors’ (or, more properly speaking, ex-‘warriors’) as well as converts were expected to conform to standardized ritual norms.

This stress on standardization did not necessarily eradicate all forms of Muslim ritual practice which expressed, in one way or another, the identity of particular groups. Such rituals included, for example, special dances during the month of Ramadan or in celebration of the Prophet’s birthday. Formerly, such celebrations had distinguished Muslims from ‘pagans’, sometimes more unambiguously than prayer or fasting. Increasingly, these dances were relegated to the particular ‘ethic’ domain, considered irrelevant, if not in contradiction, to the principles of the Islamic sphere. At the same time, in addition to the renewed emphasis on prayer, fasting, etc., other practices were being disseminated throughout the Islamic sphere, notably a set genre of sermonizing outside the context of the mosque, particularly as part of funeral observances, as well as through sermons by travelling preachers sanctioned by the colonial state. In short, a more standardized Islamic culture, with its centre in the new colonial towns, was being disseminated throughout French West Africa, even to the former centres of Islamic learning (see Soares 1997a: ch. 8; Eickelman 1989).
The conflict within

Paradoxically, the very emergence of this generalized, relatively standardized Islamic sphere generated violent conflict within. At stake were both the very nature of and leadership over the Muslim community. Of course, conflict, including conflict between Muslims on religious issues, was nothing new in West Africa, as evidenced by the jihads of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. However, the central issues of the jihads were often directly political: could political/military elites legitimately rule over Muslim subjects if their religious behaviour did not conform to clerical norms? Could clerics legitimately co-operate with such ‘warrior’ rulers? Could clerics in their own right legitimately rule over a polity? In contrast, the issues dividing Muslims during the colonial period often centred around questions of legitimate religious authority within and over the Muslim community at large, but not over the state per se.\(^1\)

Given this important shift, the extent to which debate between Muslims took place within what can be called the ritual arena is striking though perhaps not surprising. During the colonial period, particular groups were often identified by themselves and others (African and French), first and foremost, in terms of ritual signposts: ‘onze grains’ (eleven beads), those who kept eleven rather than twelve beads in one division of their rosary indicating that they recited a particular prayer eleven times; ‘bras croisés’ (crossed arms), those who prayed the ritual daily prayers with their arms crossed. It should be pointed out that the proper way to pray is in and of itself a doctrinal issue, but there was clearly more at stake than doctrinal differences.

Those French colonial officials of a paranoid bent tended to interpret these signs as a secret code challenging the legitimacy of overrule by ‘infidels’, in this case, of course, the French. In a sense, but only in a sense, they were right. Such conflicts were indeed about legitimacy, but not, at least directly, about the French. Rather, they were about legitimacy of leadership within the Islamic sphere. Of course, individually speaking, some (indeed many) characterized as ‘onze grains’ and ‘bras croisés’ were anti-colonialists, all the more so to the extent that they were targeted as such by the colonial authorities in any case; however, nothing could be more misleading that to assert, for example, that they became ‘the religious wing of the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain [R.D.A., the anti-colonial political party] in French West Africa’ (Hiskett 1984: 290).

The ‘onze grains’ or ‘Hamallists’, as they were often called by the French, were the followers of Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Sayyidina Umar, more usually known as Shaykh Hamallah (c. 1883–1943), who was born into a lineage which claimed shari'ian ancestry, that is, descent from the Prophet Muhammad.\(^2\) Prior to the French colonial conquest of the broader region in the late nineteenth century, Hamallah’s father had been active in a merchant diaspora community that traded between the desert and the savanna and eventually settled in the town of Nioro du Sahel, at the time an important commercial centre in French colonial Soudan (Mali), close to the Mauritanian border. Hamallah pursued a religious education
in the shadow of French colonial rule and was eventually initiated into the Sufi order of the Tijaniyya, one of the dominant institutional forms through which Islam had been practised in this part of West Africa since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Hamallah became a disciple of Sidi Muhammad al-Akhdar, a North African leader of the Tijaniyya, who first argued, in West Africa, that the special litany of the Tijaniyya, 'The Pearl of Perfection' (Arabic, Jawharat al-kamal) prayer, ought to be recited eleven, instead of twelve, times (hence the differing number of beads in the appropriate section of the rosary).

The issue, trivial as it might seem, had far-reaching implications. The Tijaniyya was, if not first introduced, at least first widely disseminated in West Africa by al-Hajj Umar Tall, who established a jihadist state over large parts of what is present-day Mali. In the colonial period, the descendants of al-Hajj Umar reverted from a ruling dynasty to a clerical one. They and their associates remained important actors within the Tijaniyya in West Africa (and beyond), not least because many leaders of the Tijaniyya in French colonial West Africa traced some connection to al-Hajj Umar and/or his associates and followers. Paradoxically, whereas the jihadist Umarian state had been considered one of the archenemies of the French in the nineteenth century, the colonial authorities were able to establish a close working relationship with the 'marabouts' of the Tall family. Al-Akhdar's insistence on the exclusive propriety of eleven recitations, as opposed to the twelve practised by the Tall and virtually all other Tijanis in West Africa, constituted a direct challenge to the spiritual authority of the existing Tijaniyya in West Africa, including that of the Tall family. His choice of Nioro as a centre for propagating his message was even more controversial, as this was (and still remains) one of the centres of the religious activities of the descendants of al-Hajj Umar and his close associates. Perhaps at the insistence of the latter, the French authorities expelled al-Akhdar from Nioro. However, finding no legitimate grounds to detain him, they allowed him to return to Nioro, where he designated Hamallah, despite his youth, as his successor before his death in 1909.

Unlike al-Akhdar, Hamallah was a local man, and, as such, even more dangerous to existing spiritual hegemonies, not only in the town of Nioro but also in the broader region. Both Hamallah's ascent as a religious leader and the opposition to him can be understood only within the larger colonial context that came to encompass and transform the pre-existing social and political organization of the region. If certain lineages of religious specialists such as the Tall and others had been important in the period before French control of the region, things were radically different in the new colonial setting. From the town of Nioro, Hamallah became an axis around which different individuals and groups from the broader region gravitated. Not long after the death of al-Akhdar, Hamallah drew followers from nearly all the major groups near Nioro, from those considered religious specialists as well as 'warriors' — something which did not escape the attention of the French (see Soares 1997a: ch. 3). However, his support was by no means restricted along ethnic, much less kinship or 'tribal', lines. Hamallah attracted followers from a wide variety of
backgrounds throughout the French colonies in West Africa: religious intellectuals from established clerical lineages; newer religious intellectuals; African colonial civil servants; recently urbanized social marginals; and new converts to Islam. In short, Hamallah managed to attract a much larger, diverse and geographically dispersed following than had al-Akhdar, for all intents and purposes setting up a rival branch of the Tijaniyya, which its members called the Hamawiyya.

This was not, however, the first time that the French had had to cope with the formation of a new Sufi order, or at least a new branch. Their initial reaction to the formation of the Muridiyya, an offshoot of the Qadiriyya under the spiritual leadership of Ahmadu Bamba in Senegal, had been hostile. From 1895 to 1902, Ahmadu Bamba was exiled to Gabon, and in 1903 to 1907 to Mauritania. However, the French attitude gradually softened, not least because of the advocacy of Paul Marty, the leading administrator-expert on ‘l’Islam noir’ (Harrison 1988: 115–17). In any case, there were a number of reasons why the Muridiyya might seem less alarming to the French. First of all, it recruited followers mostly along ethnic lines, Islamizing both the former political/military elite, the ceddo, and the peasantry among the Wolof. Moreover, it involved itself in the expansion of the cultivation of peanuts as a cash crop, conveniently fuelling the colonial economy in just the way the French desired.

In fact, Marty also drew a sympathetic portrait of Hamallah, whom he thought could also be brought over to support the French if properly wooed. While the authorities undoubtedly tried to woo Hamallah, he contented himself with fulfilling his obligations, such as paying taxes. Colonial administrators were often troubled by his aloofness and reproached him for never proposing his services to the administration. Arguably, the most crucial difference between Ahmadu Bamba and Hamallah was their attitude not towards the French but rather towards other established Muslim leaders. Ahmadu Bamba’s supporters were recruited from the ranks of the formerly uncommitted; his movement carved out its own, newly formed ‘niche’. Hamallah was not only ‘poaching’ on the grounds of established leaders (from their point of view), but, even worse, directly calling into question their claims to leadership. The Muslim community was, of necessity, polarized, at times violently so, with fights breaking out in the 1920s between supporters and detractors of Hamallah. The French responded by forcing Hamallah into exile for a period of ten years, at first to Mederdra in Mauritania and later, after an even more violent outbreak in the town of Kaédi (also in Mauritania), to Côte d’Ivoire. Hamallah’s exile lasted until he was allowed to return to Ni maar in 1936, though not, as it turned out, for long. In August of 1940, most likely taking advantage of the news of the recent French capitulation, a band of armed men, led by Hamallah’s oldest son, attacked members of a rival group at the site of Mouchgag in the region of the Hodh in neighbouring Mauritania, killing a number of them in retribution for an earlier attack. Although the longstanding rivalry which culminated in such violence cannot be separated from the competition for scarce economic resources in a region prone to uneven rainfall and drought, the outbreak clearly had a religious
dimension: some of those Hamallah’s son attacked were adamantly opposed to Hamallah as a religious leader. Predictably, Hamallah was blamed by the colonial authorities, though there is no evidence that he was in any way personally responsible. Indeed, he even repudiated those involved in the attacks, including his own two sons. This time, Hamallah was exiled outside French West Africa, for good measure, first to Algeria and then to Vichy-controlled France, where he died in 1943. After a trial of those allegedly involved in the Mouchagag attacks, nearly thirty men, including two of Hamallah’s sons, were executed, and hundreds of others, including some of Hamallah’s most prominent followers who had taken no part in the attacks, detained in concentration camps.19

In fact, the attitudes of the French colonial authorities towards Hamallah and his followers were hardly consistent. However, the very inconsistencies reveal fundamental discrepancies between, on one hand, French ideological constructs of ‘public’ and ‘private’ and, on the other, the very existence of a troubling Islamic sphere. Particularly after the Dreyfus affair, ‘religion’ in France was emphatically related to the ‘particular’, if not the ‘private’ domain. In principle, it was decidedly not the business of political authorities—even colonial—to intervene in religious matters (nor, of course, the business of religious authorities to meddle in politics). In keeping with this dichotomy, two contradictory portraits of Hamallah emerged. His detractors painted him as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a subversive in a marabout’s burnoose, who remained aloof from the administration, pretending to avoid politics, hypocritically discharging his obligations while covertly inciting his supporters against the clerical supporters of the French, and ultimately in defiance of the French authorities themselves. Alternatively, he could be portrayed as a mystic, an individual whose exclusive concerns were spiritual and whose unworldly preoccupation with Sufi esoterica easily left him at the mercy of the machinations, not only of his enemies but of some of his supporters. One way or the other, outbreaks of violence were seen as expressions of ‘fanaticism’, that is to say, the illegitimate mingling of religion with politics; opinions differed mostly on whether the blame was all on one side or else to be shared, and whether Hamallah himself was perpetrator or victim.

In a sense, both portraits are correct; in another, both miss the point entirely. The problem lay precisely in the existence of an Islamic sphere distinct both from the narrowly particular and the narrowly political, a sphere which the French were ideologically unprepared to acknowledge or even perceive as such. Hamallah’s claims to supplant the existing leadership of the Tijaniyya on the grounds that twelve recitations rather than eleven constituted a mistake, an innovation, an impurity, were ipso facto disruptive. This was no mere mystical fiddling with numerology, and even less a spiritual quest which engaged only the individual as such, an eminently ‘private’ reading of religious issues. This was a bid for leadership of a growing Islamic community, and moreover, from the point of view of the existing spiritual hegemonies in West Africa, one that was quite literally subversive. (The acceptance of Hamallah as spiritual leader by one of the leading clerics in the Tall family, Cerno Bokar Salif Tall of Bandiagara, only made matters worse.) To the extent that Hamallah’s challenge—precisely
because the stakes were so high – led rather predictably to violence, to rioting, he can be blamed for disrupting ‘l’ordre public’. However, the authority he was claiming was over a religious community and not (as was formerly the case with the jihadists) over the state. The contested domain lay precisely in between the purely ‘public’ domain of the state and the purely ‘private’ domain of religion as conceived by the French (and, for that matter, by many postcolonial depictions of Hamallah and the Hamallists, which tend to waiver between the ‘resistance hero’ and the ‘spiritual master’).

After the Second World War, the French were confronted by yet another Islamic ‘menace’. By then, the French were quite prepared to come to terms with the Hamallists. The responsibility for the most brutal acts of repression could be conveniently laid at the feet of the Vichy regime. Perhaps more important, we strongly suspect that the Hamawiyya had by then carved itself out a fairly stable sphere of influence, its share of the Islamic sphere. No more mass defections might be expected from supporters of the leaders of the existing Tijaniyya, who still retained a substantial following. The controversy died down, until, in the end, the number of beads on one’s rosary finally became, as the French had so passionately wished, a private (or at least particular) concern. Last but not least, the Wahhabiyya – the new ‘enemy’ – challenged eleven- and twelve-beaders alike, inciting them to join ranks against this latest ‘subversive’ disruption.

The leaders of this new movement were a group of young men who had returned from study at al-Azhar University in Cairo, where they had been exposed to the ‘reformist’ ideas embodied in the writings of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida.20 Their critique was far broader than that of the Hamallists, calling into question the entire clerical establishment, most notably (but hardly exclusively) the Tijanis, including Hamallists. They denounced all forms of Sufism as an illegitimate attempt to introduce intermediaries between God and the believer; by the same token, they rejected all forms of veneration of holy men, alive or dead. They opposed any production or use of magic, for example the manufacture and sale of amulets; in fact, such goods and services constituted an important source of income for clerics. They decried a host of practices – for example, the ostentatious distribution of ‘alms’ (sadaga in Arabic) during life-crisis ceremonies – characteristic of the ‘old’ commercial/clerical elite. They also denounced all ostentation in dress, adopting plain white (or sometimes, for women, plain indigo) robes, easily singling them out in public.

Yet the issue which apparently aroused the most passionate controversy was their form of prayer, with arms crossed rather than straight. Technically, either form of prayer ought to be acceptable to Sunni Muslims. The Maliki school of jurisprudence, virtually the exclusive school in North and West Africa, holds for straight arms, but other unimpeachably ‘orthodox’ schools differ on this point.21 Undoubtedly, the experience of the hajj for the growing (though always, until late in the colonial period, relatively small) number of West African pilgrims, constituted a shock, a realization that Muslims did not automatically pray in exactly the same posture. However, the acceptability of various schools of jurisprudence does not necessarily give the believer licence to choose practices
at will. Arguably, if one prefers one school over another, one ought to abide consistently by that specific set of rules. However, the Wahhabis were not simply objecting to the Maliki school *per se*, but more generally to legal formalism. The point was that any commitment to following such precise sets of rules entailed an acceptance of the leadership of those who had mastered them, that is to say, the clerics. To reject ‘Maliki formalism’ was, by the same token, to reject the ‘marabouts’ as a whole. This also meant that the Wahhabis had to set up their own system of education, distinct from the Qur’anic schools of the clerics they castigated. Indeed, they strove to ‘modernize’ religious education by stressing mastery of grammar and vocabulary in Arabic rather than rote memorization, as did the ‘marabouts’. The point, even here, was to allow the individual believer more direct access to the ‘sources’ – the texts, in this case – short-circuiting the ‘illegitimate’ mediation of maraboutic authority.

As in the case of the Hamallists, the reaction of those whose leadership over the Islamic community was directly called into question was predictably hostile. The French, equally predictably, sided with the clerics. They were suspicious of any movement which might look outside West Africa, to Cairo or the Hijaz, for leadership, and which might consequently (not inexplicably) combine pan-Islamic and anti-colonial sentiments. More generally, they looked askance at any movement which might stir up enough controversy to disturb the peace. Indeed, in 1957 and 1958, violent clashes between supporters and opponents of the Wahhabis occurred in various towns: Kankan, Bouake, Sikasso, Bamako. Of course, by this time, the political situation was radically different. The French had no interest in being as heavy-handed with the Wahhabis as they had with the Hamallists; even so, they made it quite obvious where their sympathies lay (Soares 1997a).

However, the clashes between Wahhabis and their opponents were not just about leadership over the Islamic community, but about the very nature of that community itself. Many of the ritual features against which the Wahhabis inveighed, for example, the ostentatious distribution of ‘alms’ during funeral ceremonies, were precisely ways of marking *particular* hereditary identities – ethnicity, ‘caste’ membership, slave origins, kin groups affiliation, membership of ‘traditional’ political/military or clerical groups – in an Islamic idiom. By implicitly if not explicitly denying the salience of hereditary origins, the Wahhabis readily attracted converts among categories such as ex-slaves, ‘casted’ groups, or recently converted ‘pagans’. This is not, by any means, to suggest that the Wahhabiyya was a ‘religion of the oppressed’; quite the contrary, they had a reputation for being prosperous merchants. The opening up of the merchant sector had created a whole category of ‘*nouveaux riches*’, many of whom came precisely from groups formerly stigmatized, to one extent or another, by the ‘old’ hereditary commercial elites. Seen from one perspective, the Wahhabis were engaged in an attempt to restructure the Islamic sphere in order to rid it definitively of heridity particularisms; in the eyes of their detractors, however, they constituted on the contrary an exclusive club of well-to-do merchants, distinguishing themselves very visibly from run-of-the-mill Muslims not only by their manner of dress but, more scandalously, by their manner of prayer.
The general, the particular and the Islamic

The French identification of Islamic leaders and movement as either ‘loyal’ or ‘seditious’ missed the point. Admittedly, after the Second World War, many Hamallists and Wahhabis were sympathetic to the RDA, the nationalist political party, not least because they had been systematically harassed by the French colonial administration. On the other hand, the RDA also received support from individuals adamantly opposed to the Hamawiyya and/or the Wahhabiyya, and the nationalists clearly had every interest in avoiding taking sides. Indeed, some Hamallists and Wahhabis, admittedly a minority, staunchly supported the French. What the Hamallists and Wahhabis were fighting for was control over an Islamic sphere defined, not so much in opposition to, but as outside the control of the colonial state. Paradoxically, as has been argued elsewhere, the ‘loyal’ clerics shared, in their own way, the same concerns (Launay 1996). Declarations of support, solicited or even unsolicited, which the marabouts offered the French were a means of removing the Islamic community as such (but not necessarily individual Muslims) from the political arena.

The very ‘publicity’ of Islam, the visible presence of the Muslim community, related to the growth of colonial cities and was most tangibly expressed by public prayer, especially Friday midday prayer at the main mosque and, even more, on the ‘Id, the two major annual holidays of the Muslim calendar. For this very reason, violent controversy within the Muslim community in the colonial era often centred on modes of prayer; the idiom of debate was not ‘rational–critical’, as Habermas would have it for the bourgeois public sphere in Europe. The arbiter was not ‘public opinion’ but rather *ijma*, the ‘consensus’ of the Muslim community about proper religious conduct, religious authority and leadership within that community. In ways that were radically new in the colonial period, the Islamic sphere, the Muslim community, transcended ‘particular’ identities. At stake, however, was the nature and extent of this trans-scendence. Were particular identities to be subsumed within the Islamic sphere (and, if so, which ones and how)? Was there any place for the hereditary transmission of learning and of *baraka* (charisma), which might ensure the pre-eminence of the descendants of al-Hajj Umar Tall or of a *shari‘i* like Hamallah, and, more generally, of the descendants of the former commercial, clerical and perhaps also political/military elites? Or was there no place in the Islamic sphere for hereditary sanctity, indeed hereditary distinction, but only for a piety which necessitated no direct intermediary (or so it might seem) between God and the believer?

Of course, whatever the analogies between the ‘Muslim community’ in French West Africa and Habermas’ ‘public sphere’, they are hardly equivalent. However rapid and far-reaching the process of Islamization may have been, a substantial portion of the population — the majority in many colonies — was either Christianized or else remained unconverted by one or another world religion, ‘animists’ in the language of the census. Did the Islamic sphere really belong to the realm of the ‘general’, or was it rather another ‘particular’ form?
The problem lies with the relativity of the notions of ‘general’ and ‘particular’. The example of ethnicity is revealing and, in this context, also salient. The ‘ethnies’, as constituted during the colonial period, were in important respects generalizing categories, ignoring and in some cases virtually eradicating a host of particular allegiances to kin groups, villages, chiefdoms, military alliances, trading partnerships, marriage networks, etc. On the other hand, their very conception rested on the elaboration of a scheme of real or (for the most part) supposed particularities in the domains of language and culture but also ‘race’ and ‘character’ which allegedly differentiated one ‘ethnie’ from another. Each ‘ethnie’ had, in more ways than one, its own set of ‘interests’. The rationale behind the French ‘politique des races’ was that each such group needed to be governed in its own interests, as identified by the French in terms of their particular aptitudes. However, their very emergence as general communities made them particularly effective as bases for the constitution of ‘interest groups’, that is to say, within the context of the colonial or post-colonial state, representatives of particular interests.

Of course, there remains a fundamental difference between the ‘Muslim community’ and ‘ethnic communities’. Ethnicity is intrinsically an exclusive idiom. ‘Ethnic communities’ are only logically and sociologically conceivable in contradiction, if not opposition, to others. For this very reason, an ‘ethnic community’ as such cannot form the basis of a ‘state’, unless it is perpetually at war with its neighbours. Islam, on the other hand, is universalizing by vocation. In principle, the Muslim community overrides local, ethnic, indeed national allegiances; indeed, hard-line Islamists are hostile to the ideal of the ‘nation-state’, not as a state but as a nation (see Piscator 1986). Through the mechanism of conversion the Muslim community is also intrinsically ‘open’; any one who does not belong is not only free, but positively encouraged, to join. What is more, the oneness of the Muslim community, its compelling claim to the overriding allegiance of its members, is symbolically expressed five times a day through prayer.

It follows that the ‘consensus’ of the ‘Muslim community’ can plausibly claim to ‘represent’ the ‘general’ populations of particular states. For this reason, the religious leadership of the Muslim community is of direct political concern to the state. The process may work in two directions. Individuals, clerics for example, may lay claim to ‘representing’ the Muslim community vis-à-vis the state; conversely, the state may attempt to identify and influence Muslim leaders in order to ‘represent’ its interests to the Muslim community. One way or the other, the outcome may entail very different scenarios for the politicization of the Islamic sphere. On one hand, Muslim religious leaders can directly or, more often indirectly (as official ideologues), take control of the organs of the state, turning it into an ‘Islamic republic’, merging the state and the Islamic sphere so that control over one entails control over the other, politicizing religion and ‘spiritualizing’ politics at one go. At the other extreme, particularly in states where Muslims cannot plausibly claim to constitute a majority, the state may attempt, with more or less success, to relegate the ‘Muslim community’ to the
status of a particular interest group, along the lines of 'ethnic communities'. This is, for example, the policy of Côte d'Ivoire, where the state self-consciously doles out benefits along both ethnic and religious lines, building churches and mosques or allotting television air time to Catholics, Protestants and Muslims. This 'particularization' of the Islamic sphere is a direct continuation of French policy, an attempt to keep it as safely as possible within bounds and especially under control, identifying 'friendly' or 'loyal' religious leaders to whom one distributes favours in order to sway, if not to enlarge, their following.

In the meantime, radical changes in communications have tended to have the same kinds of impact on the Islamic sphere that Habermas describes, with alacrity, for the bourgeois public sphere. The hajj is organized through charter flights and package tours, allowing maximum control to local governments at one end, the Saudi government at the other. Petrodollars, especially from Saudi Arabia, have funded the construction of mosques and Islamic cultural centres but, even more crucially, of religious schools which draw pupils away from clerical elites. The national media – radio and television – provide access to some (but not all!) Muslim leaders, giving an additional edge to those who possess the technical know-how to use them to full advantage. (Any deregulation of the mass media will tip the scales even more fully to the benefit of those with access to outside money and skills.) In any case, cassette tapes of sermons, less easily controlled by the state than the mass media, circulate from hand to hand and for sale in the marketplace (Launay 1997). Like 'public opinion', the 'consensus' of the Muslim community is increasingly an object of manipulation. Be that as it may, the process of subjection of the Islamic sphere – to the state, to 'centrally' controlled mass media – is by no means complete. The Islamic sphere retains an ever more precarious autonomy, betwixt the political and the particular.

The focus of this paper on the colonial creation of an Islamic sphere may seem unduly narrow. After all, large parts of French West Africa were evangelized, rather than Islamized. The French colonial authorities reacted in much the same way towards leaders of independent African Christian Churches – the Prophet Harris, for example as towards those Muslim leaders like Shaykh Hamallah deemed 'unruly'. It could – perhaps should – be argued that French colonial rule created an entirely new kind of 'religious sphere' rather than, strictly speaking, an Islamic one. Is this not rather the most appropriate level of 'generality'? Paradoxically, the colonial authorities simultaneously attempted to inhibit, if not suppress, the emergence of self-proclaimed African Christian Churches while attempting to enhance a French-identified 'African' Islam. As this rather crucial difference might suggest, even if it is possible to speak in terms of a 'religious sphere', it developed in significantly different ways along Christian and Muslim lines. Most basically, the 'general' community, in Christian terms, was identified with a Church and its institutions; in Islam, with the global community of Muslims. Christianity was immediately experienced by West Africans in the form of multiple Churches; the allegiance of Christians was, first and foremost, to one Church or another, rather than to the Christian community as a whole. In the Islamic domain, on the contrary, Hamallists, Wahhabis and their opponents all
consider themselves members of a single Islamic community. Christian Churches may vie with one another for converts, for adherents; Muslim ‘movements’ compete, instead, for leadership over the ‘community’ as a whole. It is because the wholeness of this community is expressed most powerfully in ritual terms, especially through collective prayer, that the performance of public ritual of one form or another is often the central locus of confrontation. For this very reason, during the colonial period, the French were much more likely to find themselves drawn into situations of conflict between Muslim groups than between Christians or indeed, for that matter, between Muslims and Christians.

Rivalry, if not violent conflict, between Muslims and Christians, wherever it has occurred (especially after the colonial period) is a reliable index of the politicization of the religious domain, where the stakes are either control over state institutions or access to state resources. However, many Muslims are still vitally concerned about how (and how not) to pray, about the appropriateness (or impiety) of ostentatiously distributing ‘alms’ during funerals, about whether or not it is wrong for young women to dance during Ramadan (or, for that matter, at any other time). These ‘ritual’ concerns, to the extent that they are still hotly contested within the Muslim community, testify to the continued existence of an autonomous Islamic, if not generally a ‘religious’, sphere in contemporary francophone West Africa.

Notes

1 On French colonial attitudes and policies towards Islam, see Cruise O'Brien (1967); Triaud (1974); Robinson (1988); Robinson and Triaud (1997); Soares (1997a); and especially Harrison (1988).
2 For a critique of such characterizations, see Launay (1996).
3 For a cogent critique of such perspectives even in the study of resistance movements, see Weiskel (1980a, 1980b).
4 Levzion (1973) is an excellent summary of the early history of the region, both as concerns political economy and Islam. Hiskett (1984) provides a longer-term overview of the subject.
5 There exists a vast literature on precolonial Muslim commercial networks; see, for example, Person (1968: 88–129); Launay (1978, 1982); Baier (1980); and Roberts (1987).
6 On this clerical network, see Person (1968: 131–51); Wilks (1968); Sanneh (1979); Saad (1983); and Launay (1990).
7 For a critique of such colonial approaches and their legacy, see Mudimbe (1988).
8 On the construction and consequences of this system of classification, see Amselle and M’Bokolo (1985) and Amselle (1990).
9 The example of the difference between ‘Senufo’ and ‘Baoule’ is very literally taken from the writings of Maurice Delafosse, an early administrator who became a leading scholarly authority on West Africa; see Launay (1998).
11 The French pursued a similar policy in Morocco in promulgating the (infamous) Berber decrees.
12 One such success story is the case of the Kooroko blacksmith ‘caste’ of Wassulu, who managed to carve out a particularly lucrative niche in colonial long-distance trade networks; see Amselle (1977).
13 On the other hand, in certain areas, ex-slaves who continued to live with or near their
former masters remained (and indeed remain) at a considerable disadvantage.
14 Initially, in fact, the French placed very tight restrictions on the Pilgrimage, issuing
permits only to a handful of clerics deemed unimpeachably loyal to France. Such controls
were gradually relaxed.
15 The implications of these changes, in ritual and in other domains, in a specific West
African community are detailed in Launay (1992), especially chapters 3 and 5.
16 This contrasts sharply with the series of armed struggles led by Muslims against the
French particularly during the last half of the nineteenth century in the Senegambia. See
17 On Shaykh Hamallah and the Hamawiyya, see Traoré (1983); Harrison (1988:
164–82); Hamès (1983); Soares (1997a: ch. 3). See also two studies of one of his most
18 On the Muridiyya, see Cruise O’Brien (1971, 1975); Coulson (1981); Copans (1980).
19 The detainees who survived incarceration were not released until 1946.
20 On the Wahhabiyya, see Kaba (1974); Amselle (1985); Soares (1997a: esp. ch. 7); on
the reaction of a local Muslim community against the Wahhabis, see Launay (1992: esp.
chs 4 and 5).
21 Praying with crossed arms was also popularized in West Africa by Ibrahim Niass, a
Tijani cleric based in Senegal, a large percentage of whose followers lived outside French
West Africa, most notably in northern Nigeria (see Brenner 1993: passim).
22 It is tempting to cite Somalia and the former Yugoslavia as examples.
23 See, for example, the discussion of Muslims as an ‘ethnoreligious group’ in Bosnia
24 On the Prophet Harris, see Bureau (1971); Haliburton (1971); Walker (1983).

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