



# THE WAHHABIYYA

Islamic Reform and Politics  
in French West Africa

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## Preface

The present study is the outgrowth of a long interest in Islam among the traders in a part of West Africa now within the states of Guinea, Mali, and Ivory Coast. Limited in scope and time as it is, it focuses on a little-known reform movement which spread from Bamako, Mali, and contributed to the anticolonial struggle between 1945 and 1958. The movement in its early history was known as the *Subbanu al-Muslimin*, that is the society of the young Muslims. It was later referred to as the Wahhabi movement. We have adopted this designation because it has prevailed. The two terms, however, are frequently interchanged in the study.

This work aims at studying Islam and the Wahhabiyya especially with reference to its intellectual role in political development between 1945 and 1958.

The Wahhabi were recognizable by their praying and clothing styles. They are *les bras croisés*, that is those who pray with the arms crossed on the chest instead of extended along each side of the body. They also tended to wear the long shirt (*chemise arabe*) with or without collar and cuffs, to grow clean beards, and, above all, to inspire simplicity and puritanism, for they profess the return to the Quran and the renunciation of dancing, music, excessive polygamy, and the like.

We undertook most of the research in Bamako, Mali, because it was the main Wahhabi center and because most of the leaders of the

movement have been living there. However, we visited many other towns in Mali and Ivory Coast to gather information or to notice the existence of a Wahhabi group: Wolosobugu, Buguni, Kangaba, Ségou, Sikasso in Mali; Treichville, Agboville, Bouaké, Abenguru in Ivory Coast. We met in Bamako, Abidjan, and Dakar Guineans from all social strata who were knowledgeable about the relations between religion and politics in their country.

The sources for this study have been documents from the Kuluba Archives in Bamako where all government, police, and district reports are kept in good condition, though they need a more systematic classification in catalogue form. Secondary books and articles and miscellaneous circulars on Islam in Soudan, Guinea, and Ivory Coast between 1945 and 1958 were available at different libraries in Paris: Centre des Hautes Etudes sur l'Afrique et l'Asie Modernes (CHEAM), La Documentation Française, Les Archives de la France d'Outre-Mer. We also consulted unpublished documents belonging to religious leaders or private individuals. All these sources are cited in the footnotes; but in the bibliography we have mentioned only the documents available in library collections or published for commercial circulation.

Yet this study could not have been undertaken without the interviews in the field. Most of the informants have been associated with contemporary Islamic affairs in their areas, either as sympathizers or opponents of the Wahhabiyya. In almost every case, we expose their identity to the reader, except when we have not had the opportunity of gathering all pertinent details on the informant or when the individual concerned has requested that his name not be mentioned. Some information was collected in an informal atmosphere at evening meetings in the yard of an influential trader where it would have been most inappropriate and bothersome to ask a speaker his identity. Oral data, however, have been checked for their veracity and have been most important for this study.

The relations of the Wahhabiyya and politics still remain inflamed with strong feelings. The collection of relevant political accounts was made difficult by the controversial character of this relationship. First, politicians are less accessible. Second, because of their position

and the national trends in politics, many were unwilling to speak of the intricate past rivalries or minimized the religious issues. Many reports on religion and politics also seem to have been removed from the archives. Yet on the basis of oral and written information, we have tried to give a comprehensive account of this relationship.

During the field work, we became acquainted with most of the Wahhabi leaders in Bamako. Because they were extremely generous with their time, we have been able to learn much about the Wahhabiyya in West Africa. We express our indebtedness to all of them and especially al-Hajj Muhammad Fodé Keita, al-Hajj Muhammad Sanusi Diabi, al-Hajj Kabiné Kaba, al-Hajj Muhammad Lamine Tunkara, al-Hajj Muhammad Kaba; al-Hajj Iya Diané, al-Hajj Karamoko Kane, Abdullahi Sow, NFakaba and Kabiné Diané, al-Hajj Fodé Cissé, al-Hajj Morissana Diabaté. Our greatest indebtedness is to al-Hajj NFaly Kaba, our uncle, who put us in Quranic and French schools and whose life has been the most beautiful and stimulating example of piousness, kindness, generosity, and humility.

We also must express our appreciation for the material help and the intellectual encouragement received at Northwestern University from the Program of African Studies, which at the recommendation of the National Unity Fellowship Committee awarded us the grant to carry out this research in 1969. Professor John Paden and Professor Ivor Wilks are the grand *karamoko*, who have initiated us to the language of modern social sciences. Dr. Paden has followed the different phases of this research and has been most generous with his time for useful suggestions, while Professor Wilks taught us how to examine the role of Islam in the African communities. We are equally indebted to the great number of American friends for their help with the English language.

Finally, this study by no means claims to be exhaustive. For, those who know best whither Islam is going in West Africa are the individuals directly involved in the promotion of Islamic education against the powerful trends of Western education. The function of this study is to bring a modest contribution to the understanding of the role of Islam in African nationalism.

## List of Abbreviations

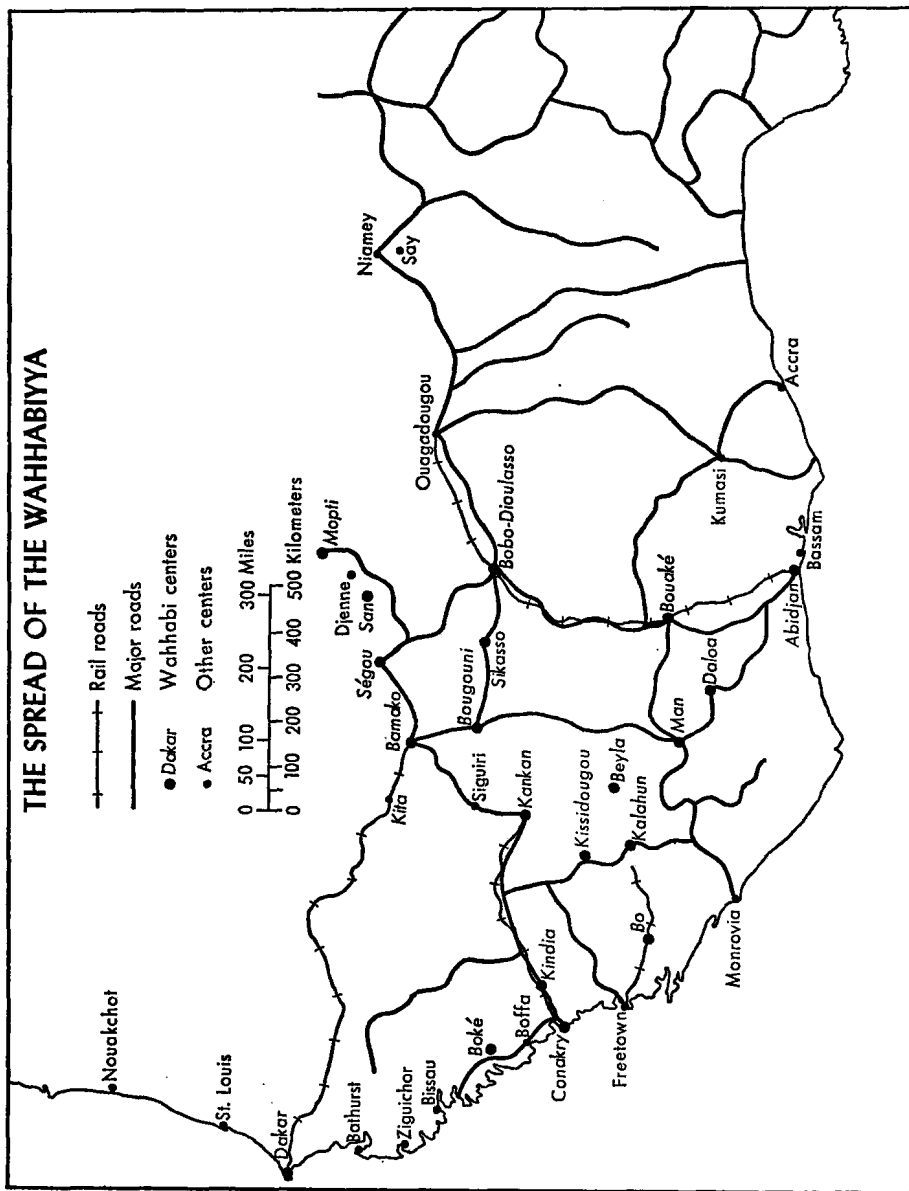
AFOM	Archives de la France d'Outre-Mer, Paris
ANMK	Archives Nationales du Mali, Kuluba, Bamako
AOF	Afrique Occidentale Française
BAG	Bloc Africain de Guinée
<i>BCEHS-AOF</i>	<i>Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l' AOF</i>
CHEAM	Centre des Hautes Etudes Administratives sur l'Afrique et l'Asie Modernes, Paris
IFAN	Institut Français (Fondamental) d'Afrique Noire, Dakar
PDCI	Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire
PDG	Parti Démocratique de Guinée
PSP	Parti Progressiste Soudanais
RDA	Rassemblement Démocratique Africain
<i>RP</i>	<i>Rapports Politiques</i>
UCM	Union Culturelle Musulmane
US-RDA	Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain

## Note on Transliteration

No precise rule governs the use of Arabic, French, and Maninka words in English. In transcribing such names, we have not always been consistent with the system adopted either by linguists or Islamists. Most of the place names mentioned in the study are left in the form adopted by the local people, that is in their French spelling. For instance, we have written Segou rather than Segu; Soudan rather than Sudan to differentiate the former French territory from the British colony; Kaolack rather than Kawlakh; Bobo-Dioulasso rather than Bobo-Dyulaso; Bouake rather than Buake. Thus we have preserved the spelling whenever the place is widely known. Other place names have been transliterated, hence Buguni for Bougouni, Kayrawan for Kerouane, Wolosobugu for Ouolossobougou. No diacritical marks have been used. Common nouns from French have been transliterated phonetically in English; for example, *marabout* becomes *marabu* (adjectival form: marabutic; derived noun: marabutism). We have chosen to spell the names of well-known leaders as they have been written in French, whereas the phonetic forms have been adopted for less well-known individuals. Arabic spelling has been preferred to Maninka or French forms in obvious cases, such as Ibrahim for Birama or Brahima; Muhammad for Madi or Mari or Mamadi; Abdullahi for Abdoulaye; Abubakar for Bakari; Suleiman for Solomana. We have kept one form for both the singular and plural of non-European words. The accents follow the French pronunciation patterns.



# THE SPREAD OF THE WAHHABIYYA



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# THE WAHHABIYYA



## Introduction

Islam has performed a crucial role in the history of West Africa, and especially in the development of the Western Sudanese societies. Equally significant has been the diffusion of Sufism—the Qadiriyya, the Tijaniyya, the Muridiyya, and the Hamalliyya—which has stimulated the local Islamic traditions, coupled with the role of the traders. The combination of these factors has helped the Muslim communities in West Africa to avoid cultural backsliding and to maintain their identity. Students of Islam in Africa have already paid much attention to this phenomenon and to the nature of brotherhoods.<sup>1</sup>

The Wahhabiyya, the most recent religious movement that has spread throughout the trading towns of Soudan, Guinea, and Ivory Coast and that has sharpened the division among the Muslims, derives from the name of Muhammad Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, a religious leader born in A.D. 1703 in Ayaina in the Najd Province, Central

1. See Ivor Wilks, "The Transmission of Islamic Learning in the Western Sudan," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. J. Goody (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1968); *idem*, "A Medieval Trade Route from the Niger to the Gulf of Guinea" *Journal of African History*, III (1962), 337-41; *idem*, "The Origin of the Dyula Towns," unpublished manuscript, Northwestern University. See also Nehemia Levtzion, *Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa: Study of Islam in the Middle Volta Basin in the Pre-Colonial Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); Raymond Mauny, *Tableau Géographique de l'ouest africain au moyen age* (Dakar: IFAN, 1963).

Arabia.<sup>2</sup> The alliance between the shaykh and Muhammad Ibn Saud, emir of Dariya, made the fortune of both the House of Saud and the religious revival. Around 1744, they started against the religious and moral laxity of the Central Arabian people a strong revivalist campaign inspired by the anti-Sufi teaching of Ibn Taimiya in the fourteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The Wahhabi denounced saint worship as heresy (*shirk*),<sup>4</sup> Sufism as a wrong innovation (*bid'a*),<sup>5</sup> and marabutism as *sihr*,<sup>6</sup> and criticized other schools for their silence on this behavior.

2. For more information on the Wahhabiyya in Arabia, see H. St. J. B. Philby, *Arabia* (London: Benn, 1930); John L. Burckhardt, *Travels in Arabia* (London: Colburn, 1829); G. S. Rentz, *Muhammad Ibn-Abd-al-Wahhab and the Beginning of Unitarian Empire in Arabia* (Ph.D. thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 1948); and Richard Bayly Winder, *Saudi Arabia in the 19th Century* (London: Macmillan 1965).

3. Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques d'Ibn Taimiya* (Cairo, 1939).

4. The concept of *shirk* refers to any form of association—especially associating a companion to God—honoring another besides God. By extension it also means polytheism. Those who practice *shirk* are called *Mushrikun*. The *shirk* theory of the Wahhabi went to the greatest extreme. Their hostility is directed against *shirk*, which in their view infects the whole of orthodox Islam in the form of the cult of saints (*wali*), prophets, and tombs. It is *shirk*, too, to credit or ascribe knowledge to soothsayers, astrologers, interpreters of dreams, and marabu. For more information, see H. A. R. Gibb and M. Th. Houtsma, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (London: Luzac, 1934).

5. *Bid'a* means some view, thing, or mode of action the like of which has not formerly existed or been practiced, an innovation or novelty. The word became important theologically in the revolt against the precise following of the Sunna of the Prophet and thus came to indicate all the new ideas and usages which grew up among Muslims, covering dogmatic innovations not in accordance with the traditional sources (*usul*) of the faith, and ways different from those of the Prophet. The word thus came to suggest dissent going to the point of heresy (deviation), although not of actual unbelief. See Gibb, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Therefore, from the Wahhabi perspective, a good Muslim is not one whose practices conform to a given pattern or way (*tariqa*) inherited from a shaykh but one whose commitments conform in practical terms to the accepted code of the Prophet.

6. The concept of *sihr* suggests magic, the use of an occult process to change a thing or an event from its original nature or form. It implies com-

The ardor to return to the primitive purity of Islam compelled Ibn Abd-al Wahhab and the emir to take up arms against the neighboring states, to conquer all Central Arabia, and to threaten the power of the Ottoman Empire and the prestige of the Sharif of Mecca. On the behalf of the sultan, the challenge came from Muhammad Ali of Egypt whose forces put an end to the Wahhabi hegemony by 1818. The military defeat did not bring about the end of the Wahhabiyya. The movement spread in the Middle East and Asia in the nineteenth century. In the present century, too, Central Arabia became unified under the leadership of the Saudi House and the influence of the Wahhabiyya. Thus, in addition to its importance from a doctrinal point of view, as Bayly Winder has written, the new polity was of political importance.<sup>7</sup> From the 1930s to the present, the Wahhabiyya has inspired the thought of many contemporary Egyptian scholars and organizations whose teaching has had an influence on the West Africans studying at Al-Azhar. The Wahhabi movement, as it became known among the traders in Bamako and elsewhere in the former French West Africa, has been a product of the contact of African Muslims with both Cairo and Mecca.

The Wahhabiyya was known to West Africans long before 1945. It is probable that the jihads of Uthman Dan Fodio and al-Hajj Umar were more or less related to the Wahhabi revival in Arabia.<sup>8</sup> In any event, the influences of the Wahhabiyya reached Morocco at the time when the Tijaniyya was being developed.<sup>9</sup> In more recent periods in West Africa, al-Hajj Abdullahi Ag Muhammad and al-Hajj

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merce with the devil or other spirits. See also Gibb, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

7. Winder, *Saudi Arabia in the 19th Century*, p. 4.

8. Uthman Dan Fodio had among his teachers the famous Jibril B. Ahmar, a *haji* and a controversial figure who allegedly was introduced to the Wahhabiyya. See Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), p. 56.

9. See E. Michaux-Bellaire, "Le Wahhabisme au Maroc," in *Afrique Française: Renseignements coloniaux* (Paris, 1928), pp. 489-92. See also Henri Terrasse, *Histoire du Maroc*, Vol. II (Casablanca: Editions Atlantides, 1949).

Tiekodo Kamagaté tried in the 1940s to restore the purity of Islam respectively in the Niger Bend area and in northern Ivory Coast. The efforts of these two preachers prepared the ground for the Subbanu activities in the 1950s. Yet this movement and its impact on Islam in contemporary Africa have been underestimated by most scholars. References to it, when they exist, are in footnotes or scarcely extend beyond a few paragraphs either full of distortions or intended to disprove its existence in Africa; the most noticeable exceptions being the studies by Marcel Cardaire<sup>10</sup> and Gouverneur Beyries.<sup>11</sup> Death put a premature end to Cardaire's pioneering work. The primary concern of Beyries was to report the change in contemporary Islam rather than to analyze it. The studies by Vincent Monteil,<sup>12</sup> J. C. Froelich,<sup>13</sup> M. Chailley,<sup>14</sup> and other researchers from the CHEAM, although useful in terms of new data, have been either too general and traditional or biased toward the Africans and apologetic for the Muslim policy of the colonial government. In addition, most of these studies have, in terms of theme and methodology, failed to cast a new light on the analysis of religious movements in the colonial context.

These authors have carried out their research on Islam in West Africa in a perspective that confers upon the situation a uniqueness so extreme as to suggest the existence of a distinctive "Black" Islamic tradition. For instance, Vincent Monteil's book is entitled *L'Islam Noir* ("Black Islam"), and Froelich has called his *Les Musulmans d'Afrique Noire* ("The Muslims of Black Africa"), with a special

10. Marcel Cardaire, "Islam et la cellule sociale africaine," *Afrique et l'Asie*, no. 29 (first trimester, 1955); *idem*, *L'Islam et le terroir africain* (Bamako: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1954); *Contribution à l'étude de l'islam noir* (Cameroun: IFAN, 1949).

11. Gouverneur Beyries, "L'Islam au Soudan Français"; "L'Islam en Côte d'Ivoire"; "L'Islam Malinké en Guinée," CHEAM 2940, 1956.

12. Vincent Monteil, *L'Islam noir* (Paris: Seuil, 1964).

13. J. C. Froelich, *Les Musulmans d'Afrique noire* (Paris: Editions de l'Orante, 1962); *idem*, "Archaïsme et modernisation: Les Musulmans noirs et le progrès," *Cahiers de l'ISEA*, no. 5 (1961), CHEAM 50803.

14. M. Chailley, "Aspects de l'Islam au Mali," *Notes et études sur l'Islam en Afrique noire*, . . . ed. CHEAM (Paris: Peyronet, 1962).



stress on the elements of African Islamic traditions which they consider as having derived from the Negro-African pre-Islamic cultural milieu. Nevertheless, neither one has developed arguments convincing enough to substantiate the hypothesis of an African version of Islam distinct from its counterparts in the Middle East or in Asia; the existence of Sufism and superstitions, the lack of good education, and the religious laxity of the common people, which they have depicted as the marks of Islam in tropical Africa, have prevailed in the Maghreb and the Middle East as well. To generalize the criticism of Monteil by Cheikh Tidiane Sy, one can state that the elements which would make Islam in Africa a "Black" Islam are not as obvious as the title or the opinion suggests.<sup>15</sup>

By limiting their analysis exclusively to religious phenomena and by focusing their attention on "impure elements" in the African Islamic traditions, most of these authors have exhibited both a narrow understanding of the concept of religion and a condescending attitude toward ordinary Muslims and lettered clerics (*marabu*) alike. This attitude has derived from the sentiment of the superiority of their training in Arabic and history.<sup>16</sup> Steeped in the prejudice of

15. Cheikh Tidiane Sy, *La Confrérie sénégalaise des Mourides* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1969), p. 13. It seems that the real issue here is the level of education rather than the particular form of Islam. Muslims in Africa and Asia continue to live in a cultural environment where superstitions and magic have maintained the importance they had in the pre-Islamic era. Islam has not incorporated these features into itself, but rather has appealed to people who have not completely departed from the traditional (pre-Islamic) belief system. Therefore, the neophytes or the poorly educated Muslims tend to have an ambivalent cultural experience. The loyalty to Islam, however strong it may be, has not destroyed the ties with traditional beliefs in processes such as healing, charming, or divination. This has led to the hasty conclusion that Islam in Africa is ignorant and impure. The same remark may well apply to rural parts of Sudan, Egypt, Iraq, etc. The elements of *sihr*, such as witchcraft, sorcery, divination, and magic, do occupy a prominent place in the traditional cultural heritage, but do not belong to Islam, although the latter recognizes the existence of malignant powers and spirits; and these spirit-possession cults have not been limited to Africa. Therefore, the idea of a black Islam needs further investigation.

16. Despite the growing number of a new breed of Africanists, former colonial administrators-turned-scholars still occupy leading positions in the