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Political/Intellectual Revolutions

During the pre-colonial period, jihads had led to the creation of theocratic states in different parts of West Africa. These jihads had certain common denominators. For one thing, they were started by learned scholars. So profoundly were they influenced by this tradition that they were frustrated by the syncretism that affected Islamic practice. They wanted to establish a political system that corresponded with the prophetic ideal that they had read about in the Islamic manuals that circulated in the region. They saw their efforts as being in the tradition of the struggle for the purification of Islam that went back to the Almoravid movement of the eleventh century, the objectives of which were to apply Maliki Islam in all its rigour. In the writings of these intellectuals, as well as in their sermons and propaganda, one can detect a language of political contestation expressed in Islamic terms. Such language, when it echoes aspirations for emancipation, can mobilize large sectors of the population.

Among the mobilizing concepts for political action is the obligation to command the good and forbid the evil (*al-amr bi 'l-ma'ruf wa al-nahy an al-munkar*). If the role of proselytization in the public sphere of Muslim countries is to be understood, it is crucial to grasp the powerful effect of the language of political contestation. It is not enough for the good Muslim just to practise the five pillars of Islam: belief in God and in the Prophet Muhammad, carrying out the five canonical prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is also necessary to uphold the good and avoid the evil. The notions of good and evil apply to all that Islam allows and all that it prohibits. How to do this varies according to the groups. Before the eighteenth century, there were two different views among the Muslim scholars. There were those who were inspired by the teachings of Al-Suyuti, and who were engaged in trade. They were pacifists, trying through their behaviour to provide a model of how Islam should be followed in order to lead the population towards more orthodox Islamic practice. Maraboutic tribes like the Kunta and communities like the Jakhanke held such views.

Then there were scholars who were inspired by the thinking of Al-Maghili, who were quicker to take up arms against their opponents (Last 1985:1-2). Both groups developed especially in the urban centres and lived from trade, while trying to purify Islam within the limits of their means.

During the eighteenth century, the crisis of the pastoral economy brought about the re-conversion of many Fulani to scholarship. Thus, the number of scholars increased considerably. The new class of scholars were essentially rural people. They tended to consider urban scholars as corrupt. Many scholars preferred to live in the countryside, far from those 'urban places of perdition', in order to organize their community in conformity with the laws of Islam. Others toured round the neighbouring regions to preach a purer Islam (Last 1985:4-5). Among the many intellectuals who, through their writings and their action, had a lasting impact on West Africa are the Fulani who led the jihads of the nineteenth century, like Karamokho Alpha in Fouta Djallon, Suleyman Baal in Fouta Toro, Uthman Dan Fodio in northern Nigeria, Ahmad Lobbo in Macina, and Al-Hajj Omar at Ségou.

Belief in the imminence of the end of the world and the arrival of the *mahdi* (an eschatological figure in Islamic millenarianism) strengthened the ability of jihad leaders to mobilize the people around them. While not all of them proclaimed themselves mahdi, they utilized these beliefs in order to mobilize or stimulate their troops. The most celebrated of these movements took place in the Sudan. Led by Muhammad Ahmad, who proclaimed himself mahdi in the Nilotic Sudan, this mahdist movement challenged the British army, killed the British General Gordon and established an Islamic state that lasted for several years before being completely defeated in January 1900, when the last emir of the mahdist state was captured (Prunier 1998:41).

In West Africa, the belief in the coming end of the world and the arrival of the mahdi helped jihad leaders to mobilize people for jihads. Among those carried out in the pre-colonial era and at the beginning of the colonial invasion, we shall cite five, before assessing their impact on the Islamic scholarly tradition.

It was under the leadership of Karamokho Alpha that Muslim scholars, supported by traders and pastoralists, led the first jihad of the eighteenth century (1727-1728) in Fouta Djallon. It was directed against the Jalonke who were overcome by the victorious jihadists. The state that resulted was known as the Imamate of Fouta Djallon. In half a century, the Imamate succeeded in changing the decentralized Mande society conquered by the jihadists into a federation governed by Islamic law, with mosques and a network of schools (Last 1985:9). It was in this Imamate, which subsequently inspired similar movements of state building, that Fulani poems began to be composed which were to spread throughout the western and central Sudan (Last 1985:10).

The second jihad of the eighteenth century took place in Fouta Toro. Led by Suleyman Baal, this jihad waged by Muslim scholars of various social origins,

who called themselves *torodbe*, succeeded in chasing the Moors and the Denyankobbe out of central Fouta in 1760 and 1770 (Last 1985:13). Suleyman Baal was assassinated in 1776 and the movement was then led by Abd al-Qadir Kane. This second Imamate consisted of a federation of villages headed by scholars who were responsible for providing Islamic education and for the administration of justice. It was a considerable step forward in spreading the Islamic scholarly tradition.

The jihad led by Uthman Dan Fodio in Hausaland in the nineteenth century was similar to the eighteenth century jihads. Dan Fodio was the author of various writings and sermons in Arabic, Hausa and Fulfulde. His most important work (Last 1967:9) is entitled *Ihya al-sunna wa ikhmad al-bid'a* (Reviving the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad and destroying innovation).⁸ This is another formulation of the precept to command the good and forbid evil. It inspired the struggle against the Hausa kingdoms, mobilizing the different peoples who were being oppressed by them. These were the pastoralists, mainly Fulani, and the farmers who were severely taxed to sustain the lifestyle of the pre-colonial Hausa aristocracy. Hence, the jihad of the nineteenth century in Hausaland has been interpreted as a socioeconomic rebellion, an ethnic revolt, and a pastoral revolution. However, given the core role of the Islamic ideal in the mobilization for this jihad and the society that the jihadists strove to establish, the movement led by Uthman Dan Fodio has also been interpreted as a movement for religious reform.

A fourth jihad, which led to an aristocracy of knowledge coming into power in West Africa in the nineteenth century, was the one in Macina. This jihad, led by Ahmad Lobbo, was to some extent an extension of the jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio. Lobbo and his disciples, who then claimed total independence from Sokoto, were not very erudite, but very pious. Lobbo mobilized his Fulani compatriots, preaching an egalitarian Muslim society to the oppressed (Last 1985:33). After the battle of Noukouma of 1818 against a coalition made up of Ardoen Fulanis and their overlords (the Diarra dynasty of Ségou), a Muslim state was created in Macina. The state took the name of Dina and Ahmad Lobbo became its Caliph, and established its capital at Hamdallahi (Last 1985:32). The supreme body of the Dina was a council of 40 members headed by a learned scholar (Hiskett 1985:178). Like earlier ones, this jihad also contributed to spreading Islamic sciences and the Arabic language. After the death of Ahmad Lobbo in 1845, numerous factions developed in his family in the struggle to control power and this weakened the regime, alienating many of the Muslim scholars from Macina in the process. Some of them rallied Al-Hajj Omar Tall, who conquered Macina in 1859 and integrated it into his empire which had resulted from a fifth jihad with important repercussions in the Western Sudan.

A towering figure of African Islam, Al-Hajj Omar Tall was born at Halwar in 1794 and died in 1864 on the cliffs of Bandiagara. He differed greatly from

many of the Muslim scholars of his time as he had travelled widely. In 1825, he made the pilgrimage to Mecca where he studied for three years. With a disciple of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani called Muhammad al-Ghali, Omar deepened his knowledge of the Tijaniyya to which he had been initiated in his home country. Muhammad Ghali appointed al-Hajj Omar as the representative (khalifa) of the Tijaniyya in sub-Saharan Africa. Omar then produced his magnum opus *Rimah hizb al-rahim ala nubur hizb al-rajim* (The spears of the party of the merciful against the throat of the party of the damned). He put forward the dogmas of the new Sufi order of which he became one of the main exponents and the spearhead in sub-Saharan Africa. Like the *Jawahir al-ma'ani* (Jewels of meanings) dictated by Ahmad al-Tijani to his disciple Ali Harazim, on the margins of which the *Rimah* is reproduced, the latter constitutes one of the main doctrinal sources of the Tijaniyya, which counts tens of millions among its followers in the world, most of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike the Qadiriyya that had preceded it, the Tijaniyya very soon proved to be a brotherhood open to all – young people, women, and so on.

When he stayed in Sokoto, Al-Hajj was the guest of Caliph Muhammad Bello, who gave him his daughter in marriage. Inspired by his experience in Sokoto, Omar led a holy war against Ségou in 1852, which ended in the construction of a huge empire centred on Ségou (Robinson 1988 *passim*). A scholar as well as a warrior, al-Hajj Omar was, as previously mentioned, a towering figure of West African Islam.

These five jihads are far from being the only ones. There were many others in the western and central Sudan that were inspired by Islam. To the extent that these jihads were led by scholars who toppled illiterate rulers to set up political systems that corresponded to an Islamic ideal, these jihads were as much military revolutions as intellectual revolutions (Hiskett 1985). It is true that they did not succeed in instituting a 'purified Islam' everywhere: the practices and beliefs denounced by the jihadists were not always eradicated. However, they led to an unprecedented growth of the Islamic scholarly tradition. Of course, before the expansion of Islam in Africa, graphic systems of representation had circulated among some populations. This was the case, for example with the alphabet *tfinagah* of Saharan Berbers used as far in the Niger Bend (Hiskett 1985:242). But there had been no scholarly tradition in sub-Saharan Africa that paralleled the Islamic one.

The dissemination of knowledge, as we have shown, did not only consist in the emergence of an Arabized clergy, but also in the growth of an erudite literature in the form of *djami* poetry. The impact of these jihads on the intellectual life in West Africa was very great. It brought about an unprecedented spread of centres of learning. In addition, it paved the way for the rise of typically Muslim cities with Islamic institutions, thus rooting an Arabic-*djami* intellectual tradition which was, however, to undergo some transformations after the colonial conquest.