SUB-SAHARAN SUFISM

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Abstract

Sufism is known as the mystic branch of Islam, one of the oldest religious currents in the Muslim world. Over time the followers of Sufism saw their relationship with Allah, Islam and involvement in politics differently. They not only questioned the role of asceticism and materialism, sharia and different interpretations of the Qur'an, but became involved in the political struggle. The most eloquent example is that of the role of Sufi brotherhoods in West Africa in the anti-colonial struggle and the transformation of their speech into a radical one, starting from its nodal point, justice.

Keywords: Sufism, Islamization, Sharia, Jihad, umma, marabout, anticolonialism

Over time, there have been a number of tendencies in Islam generated by different interpretations of the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Islamic tradition). Of these, the scientific approach involves the literal or exoteric interpretation of the Muslim sacred text. It belongs exclusively to the Sunni branch of Islam and is found mainly in Wahhabism, a doctrine that categorically rejects any other form of religious knowledge. The other tendency is the mystical, esoteric, of Sufi sources, in which the sacred texts are interpreted in symbolic and allegorical key.

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Sufism is known as the soft branch of Islam, one of the oldest religious currents in the Muslim world. In this regard, Elias claimed that „Sufism is one of the most dynamic and interesting dimensions of Islamic religion and culture. It is an umbrella term for a variety of philosophical, social and literary phenomena that appear in the Islamic world. In its narrowest sense, the term Sufism" refers to a number of Islamic schools of philosophy and mystical theology."[1]

Sufism is the mystical doctrine par excellence, within it appearing in West African Islam the confederations and, together with them, the cult of Muslim saints. According to Abdoulaye Bara Diop it is not just a religious practice, but a way of life. Specific rituals are practiced (dance, songs, incantations), meditation, the Sufi mystic thus reaching an ecstatic state and a union with the divinity.[2]

Of the believers, only a few manage to have the vision of Allah through asceticism and moral purity, through rigorous religious practice. It is about those who are half people, half saints, holders of divine charisma, *barakat*. They are marabou, the intermediaries of the relationship with Allah, who subsequently transmit to the members of the confederations they create, the "right way", tariqa.

The Islamization of the West African space was done several centuries before the colonial conquests, by installing in the courts of the sovereigns of this region these scholars and mystical scholars, popularly called *marabou*. Through them and their influence, these serene people (half people, half saints) managed in less than a generation to convert much of West African nobility to Islam. It is estimated that the first Muslims were members of the War Jabi Ndiaye family from the Tekrour kingdom of Lower Senegambia, the sovereign seeking in early Islam the peaceful communion of all the inhabitants of his kingdom, convinced by the

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[1] Jamal J. Elias, *Islam*, Pearson, 2001, p. 595.
[2] Abdoulaye Bara Diop, *La société wolof*, Paris: Karthala, 1981, p. 236.

subjective ability of the marabou from his court to bring rain. and rich harvests.[3]

One of the reasons why Sufism is considered a non-violent movement is given by the ascetic side of the movement itself. At least in its original form, the followers of the movement sought a direct and immediate connection with Allah, devoting their entire life to this pursuit and departing from profane ties with society.

Paul Heck in *Sufism and Politics* explains the believer's relationship with divinity:

> *In view of his role as a divine agent, holiness in Islam cannot be characterized by moral apathy. In other words, the mystical experience cultivated by Islam did not lead to the conclusion that the world was an illusion and an action in it meaningless. The architect of Sufism, al-Junayd (d. 910) offered an expansive interpretation of the unity of God affirmed by the Koran. To say that there are no other gods does not just mean that there are no gods other than God, but that there has never been anything but God. In this way, Sufism gave Islam a deeper understanding of the world. While it is true that Sufism tends to see this world as a source of temptation, also of ephemeral existence and, therefore, what is endured to death, it is no less true that, on a more fundamental level, Sufism concerns the world as a manifestation of the divine, creation as a mirror in which the supreme jewel of the divinity - in the echo of a canonical hadith - could be reflected and thus revealed.*[4]

However, over time the followers of Sufism saw their relationship with Allah, Islam and involvement in politics differently. Often, they not only questioned the role of *asceticism* and *materialism*, *sharia* and different interpretations of the Qur'an, but became involved in the political struggle. The most eloquent example is that of the role of Sufi brotherhoods in West

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[3] Mountaga Diagne, „La gouvernance des foyers religieux au Senegal" in A. Seck *et al.* (eds.), *Etat, Société et Islam au Sénégal*, Dakar: Karthala, 2015, p. 228.

[4] P. Heck, (ed.), *Sufism and Politics: The Power of Spirituality*, Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishing, 2007, p. 255.

Africa in the anti-colonial struggle and the transformation of their speech into a radical one, starting from its nodal point, justice. "There are so many parts of Sufism that it is difficult to understand them all. For example, although it focused on asceticism and sacredness, Sufism had important socio-political dimensions. The saints of Islam were the sometimes-provocative advisers of the Sultans, sometimes extending their blessing to legitimate leadership and, at other times, asserting their spiritual authority to the temporal powers of the day."[5]

Towards the middle of the twelfth century, in West Africa, the Sufi Islamic orders (Islamic conferences / Muslim Brotherhoods) appear, which will dominate the local religious landscape throughout the following centuries and which will give one of the particularities of African Islam. It is about establishing a network of faithful Muslim believers gathered around a central, charismatic figure, who has become a kind of "saint", a charismatic figure, whose grave often becomes a pilgrimage site for his followers. This individual, on the border between human and divine, is the possessor of a "divine blessing", which offers him special, mystical powers, and which, through his powers, can mediate the believer's relationship with Allah.

Qadiriya, the oldest of the confraternities was founded in the 12th century by the Marabou Cheick Abd al Qadir al-Jilani and has played an important role in Islamizing the population of sub-Saharan Africa, notably due to the development of the Timbuktu religious and shopping center.

The Tidianiya Brotherhood, one of the most widespread, was founded in the eighteenth century, in Fes in Morocco, by sermons Ahmed Tidiani, originally from southern Algeria. The most dynamic conference, Mouridiya, was founded by the marabou Ahmed Ben Habib Allah, known as Cheick Amadou Bamba or Serigne Touba. The mystical Sufism is based on the total renunciation of the earthly things in favor of the total devotion to the Divinity, through discipline and work. Finally, the newest

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[5] *Ibidem*, p. 150.

brotherhood is Layene, founded in the last century, in the Dakar (Yoff) region of Senegal and comprises the majority Muslim community in Lebous.

After Napoleon's initial interest in Africa in the 1700s, 130 years later, France occupies Algeria, which it integrates into the Republic. Until independence was declared in 1962, the French administration remained in Algeria where the abuses and humiliation of Muslims quickly developed a response and created an anti-colonial discourse. And among the initiators of this movement was the Sufi Sheikh Abd al Qadir from the Qadiriyya Brotherhood. Born in 1806, in the village of Maskara in Algeria, in a family of religious leaders, Al Qadir travels to Mecca and Medina for pilgrimage, then to Damascus and Baghdad, from where he returns with the elements of an anti-colonial struggle, he had based on the lack of justice for Algerian citizens oppressed by colonial power.

Concerning the situation in Africa, Donal C. OBrien analyzes the emergence and development of Sufi movements in the area and talks about the emergence of Muslim Brotherhoods, as a means by which the disciples of the black people in the area are protected in the face of an Arab racial domination, which has taken over the northern part of the continent and subsequently descended west. Even since the emergence of the Confederate movements, the "other" was considered the enemy, the signifier of the tendency of separation. To illustrate, he uses Amadou Bamba, the central figure of Senegalese Mouridism, who, during his exile in Mauritania, breaks from the original brotherhood Qadiriyya, with Arab affiliation, to create his own sect, and thus puts his followers at shelter from any possible racial downsizing and to fight against the colonizing enemy.[6]

The moment of the first active religious confession on the right and left territory of the Senegal river occurs somewhere during the seventeenth century, with the entry of the Sufi stream of the mystic Abd al Qadir al-

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[6] Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, "*The Mourides of Senegal: The Political and Economic Organization of an Islamic Brotherhood*", Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, p. 70.

Jilani. Subsequently, Sidi Ahmed Tidjani founded the Tijaniyyah order, the most widespread and with the highest number of followers. In A History of Islam in West Africa (1962), Trimingham analyzes the emergence of the first Muslim "brotherhood", focusing on the impact that the central figures of these "marabou" had on the development of Islam.[7]

The tradition of some initiates, half saints, half people, half religious leaders, half tribal leaders, comes to West Africa from the pre-Islamic period, from the animistic era. The mediation of the relationship between man and Allah is now done by marabou, individuals who have taken the role of shaman from animistic beliefs and adapted it to Islam, becoming Qur'an semi-prophets who have drawn the guidelines of Islam in West Africa.[8]

Let us not forget that with the development of the Sufi movements, local Islam was perverted by the multitude of mystics and ascetics, essentially "a hierarchy of saints of the second category, forced into a monotheistic religion"[9] With the break-up of the Arab affiliation, the Sufi confederations of black Africa will constitute their own religious autonomy and thus face a humility that could constitute spiritual subordination to the Arab world.

The spread of Islam was made in the Sahel through the efforts and charisma of these characters, who proved to be extraordinary delicacies, adapting to the socio-cultural context of an era dominated by traditional beliefs, with a supreme cult of protective ancestors and of the magical practices necessary for the struggle. against evil of all kinds. Marabou knew how to respond to the expectations of political leaders and the people, adapting Islam to local practices. They strongly pushed the boundaries of Arab Islam, playing the role of traditional magicians, for example, making

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[7] J. Spencer Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

[8] *Ibidem*, p.148

[9] C. Harman, "The Islamic Revolutions" in *A People's History of the World*, London & New York: Verso, 2008, p. 134.

amulets (gris-gris), whose role was to remove all evils and protect the believer against ephemeral evil forces.

The consideration that *marabou* benefited from, since early West-West Islam, is mainly due to the fact that they knew how to write and read, which made them sacred and inviolable and which brought them a series of economic benefits, which they they will keep up to the present time. In addition, the existence of the *marabou* was the main factor of the expansion of Islam, raising the religious vocation in a population dominated by animistic beliefs and myths but also of the fight against the influence from outside.[10]

Gradually to this is added another fundamental element, aggressive colonialism. And in order to fight against the European colonizer, it is absolutely necessary a "holy war" in which all members of the Islamic community participate. Therefore, the first "jihadist" movements in West Africa, essentially anti-colonial, take place somewhere at the end of the seventeenth century. Margaret Hill sees in the religious movements of Mauritania the first signs of change, in a society divided between the class of warriors and that of the clergy. That is, between two different Islamic discourses. And if, in his time, the cleric Nasir al Din fails in his attempt to impose sharia, two centuries later, the jihadist movements in Senegambia overturn the order of law and impose, for the first time, Islamic law, but through a political approach, hidden under the dome of an early Islamism.

> *Sharia is often translated as "holy law," but it is more than that. It is very similar to Jewish halakha. Sharia not only covers most branches of the law (from family law through criminal law to commercial law), but it regulates ritual and ethics, and even the clothing and manners of community members. Sharia is recorded in the writings of religious scholars, who disagree with each other on (usually*

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[10] *Ibidem*, p. 220.

minor) points, but exist independently of these writings - rather, historical truth exists independently of the writings of historians.[11]

All leaders of these early anti-colonial radical movements convince their followers that they fulfill the "divine will" and use their own ascetic life to set an example for other Muslims interested in Jihad. But they always consider the main reason for their war: the fight against imperialist rule. The motivation of the first jihadists is quite simple to understand: religion has been corrupted, the state no longer exists, foreigners /the "others" are masters of this world, and therefore "we", followers of the Prophet, are forced to overthrow the world order and establish sharia. They, "the others", "undermined the very foundations of Islam by legitimizing foreign innovations of religious dogma, by accepting adultery, using fermented beverages, passion for fun, songs and dancing, neglecting daily prayers and refusing to help the poor."[12]

Although Sufism is perceived as "the mystical branch of Islam"[13], its main feature is "dynamism".[14] And even if the reason for being defined as a non-violent movement in general is the tendency toward asceticism, prioritizing a direct relationship with Allah, makes Sufi-type jihad dominated by pragmatic struggles. And the anti-colonial one is, for West Africa, the most important of them. For when the natural order of things is disturbed, by the appearance of "others" in the social landscape, the Sufi mystic becomes the anti-colonial warrior, whose desire is not only to approach Allah, but to restore the right path, which the "others" have foiled. In other words, the liberation of the "Islamic land" from the domination of *kufar* (of the pagans / unbelievers - ar). But this can only

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[11] Mark Sedgwick, "Jihad, Modernity, and Sectarianism" in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, no. 11(2), 2007, p. 27.

[12] Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore, *Africa since 1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 65.

[13] Fait A. Muedini, "Examining Islam and Human Rights from the Perspective of Sufism" in *The Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, no. 7(1), 2010, p. 136.

[14] Jamal Elias, *op. cit.*, p. 595.

happen after the current state of affairs is changed. And in order for this to happen, war is needed in the situation of jihad.

"If we look at the history of colonialism in the majority Muslim countries, we will find in their vast majority Sufi orders at the center of the politico-military fighting movements."[15] This is the case of the resistance movements in Africa, but especially those of Abd al-Qadir (the founder of the Qadiriyya Brotherhood) and Ahmad al-Tijiani (the Tijianniya Brotherhood). For all these anti-colonial Jihad is the salvation of the *umma* community from the humiliations and injustices caused by the *kufar* (unbelievers - the others). The outward struggle of the Muslim believer transcends the inner struggle, which compels him to seek the best solutions to become a worthy follower of the Prophet. With the beginnings of the colonial era, in West Africa Jihad gained a new meaning. Much more pragmatic, but even more profound. Now the main duty of the believer is to fight with all means to save himself physically and to remove colonial oppression."[16]

However, in search of allies, the French colonizers understood that it is much more profitable to cooperate with religious leaders and to attract them by offering significant benefits. Thus, some of the Muslim sheikhs in sub-Saharan Africa were granted autonomy and legitimacy in exchange for a cooperative attitude with the colonial regime. According to David Robinson, in Path of accommodation, Malik Sy, one of the main actors of the nineteenth-century religious brotherhoods even spoke of the Third Republic as "a Muslim power".[17] In exchange for this collaboration, which will later emerge as one of the main nodal points of anti-colonial jihadism, the collaboration of Muslim leaders, the French authorities have received almost total submission of the *umma* leaders in West Africa.

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[15] Fait Muedini, *op. cit.*, p.136.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 137.

[17] David Robinson, "French 'Islamic' Policy and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Senegal" in *Journal of African History*, no. 29, 1988.

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